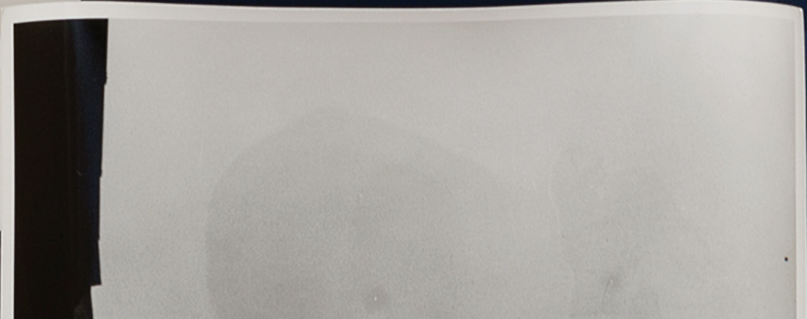
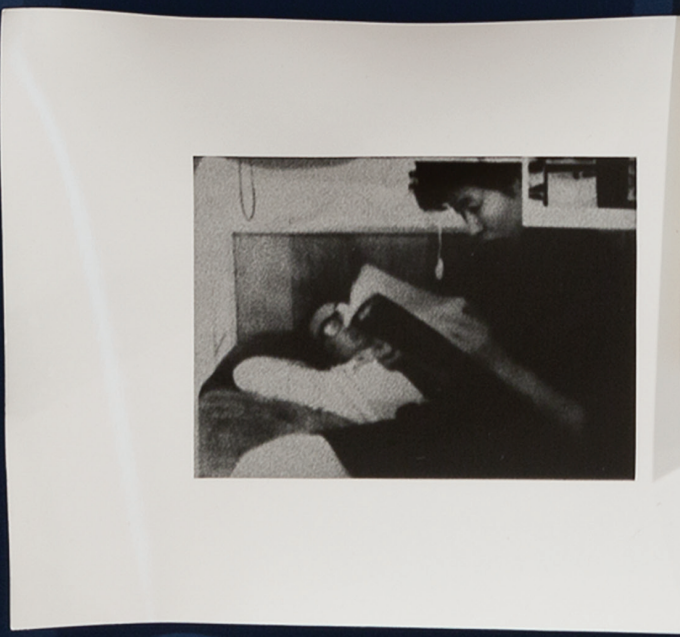
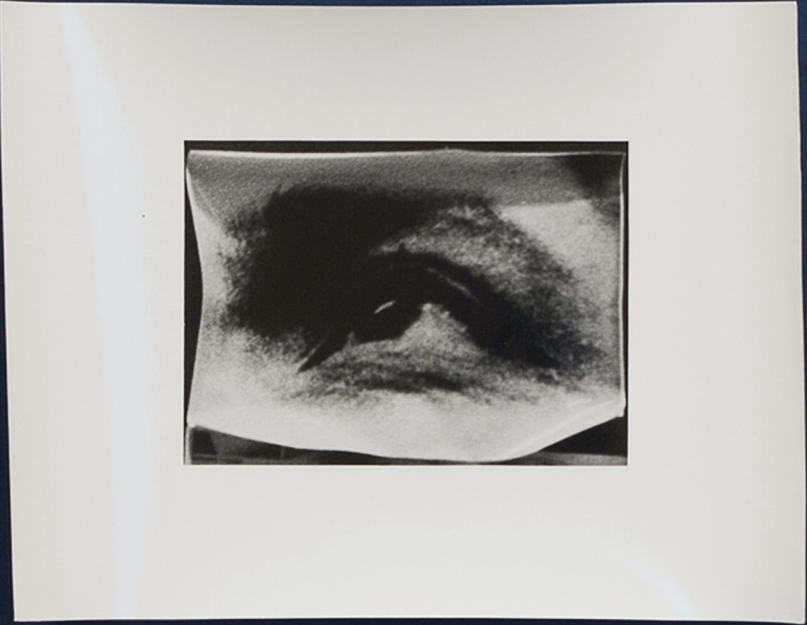
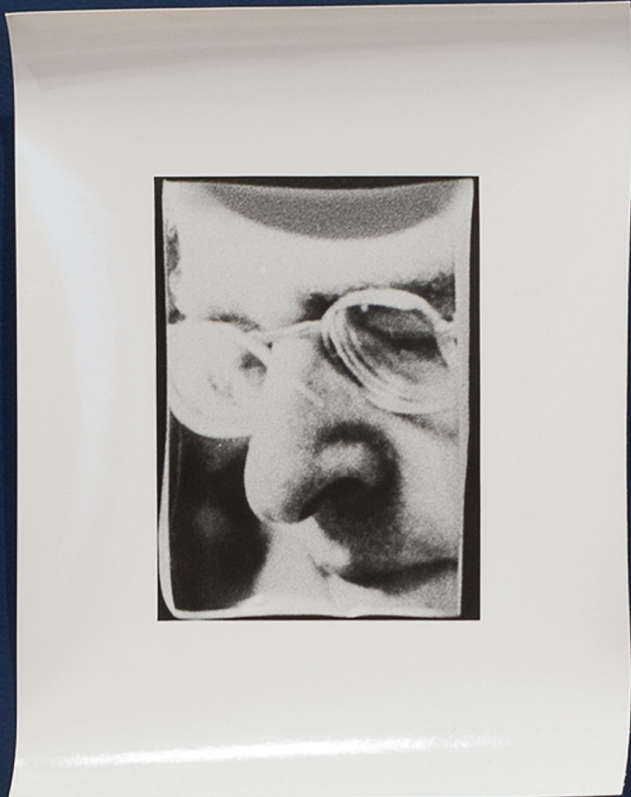
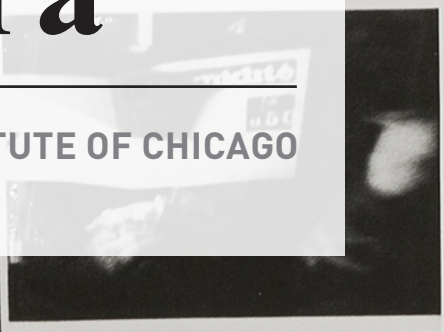
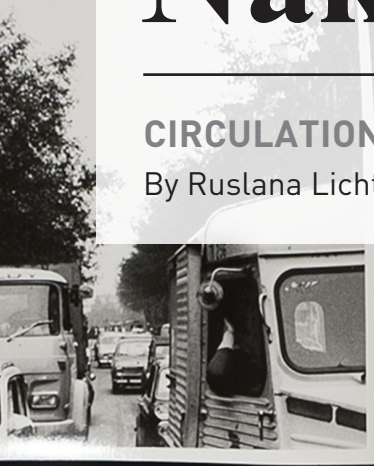


Takuma Nakahira

CIRCULATION // ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

By Ruslana Lichtzier



When I first entered *Circulation*, a solo exhibition by the deceased Japanese artist Takuma Nakahira at the Art Institute of Chicago, my senses heightened. Something in the space felt off. The aesthetics of the exhibit did not align with typical museum standards. Small-scale black and white analog photographic prints were arranged on a long, dark blue movable wall, the floor below it, and a cinderblock desk. The prints were curling, an implication of their premature drying process. They were attached to the different surfaces with glue, meaning they were in a process of destruction. The entire installation, which was comprised of two hundred and fifty-three prints, was installed in a loosely organized, yet crowded grid. Four handwritten 8.5 x 11 inch signs indicated the date, the place, and the event of each group of pictures. In the center of the constructed wall, a poster depicts the exhibition title, an illustration and a short description of the process that led to presentation of the work.

_____ This chaotic, untied, and yet modest installation felt out

of place. And indeed, it was. This exhibition is a result of a nearly five-year reconstruction process of Nakahira's 1971 photo-performance, led by the Richard and Ellen Sandor Chair and Curator of the Photography Department at the museum, Matthew S. Witkovsky. The original project, entitled *Circulation: Date, Place, Events*, took place during the seventh Paris Biennial. During the exhibition, which lasted for just less than one week, Nakahira took pictures by day, printed them by night, and hung them in the gallery space the next morning. After filling up the walls, the content began to spill to the floor. The current exhibition presents what would have been the last day of the show: October 18, 1971. The photographs depict the streets, people, movement, objects, language, television image, and posters the photographer encountered throughout the day.

_____ Using a wide lens camera, and grainy black and white film, the photographs are often blurry, their horizon lines are tilted. Embracing multiple vantage points, the images are fast and hungry,

their mental urban landscape is vital, filthy, dark, and sexy. In these photographs, Takuma Nakahira—one of the leading Japanese figures in the fields of photography and cultural criticism—utilized the “Are-Bure-Boke” style (which translates to rough, blurred, out-of-focus), which became his generation's visual trademark, importing the approach from Tokyo to the streets of Paris.¹ The images operate within an acute state of exhaustion. Responding to the rapid and unceasing demand of capitalism, they are maniacal and insomniac.

_____ On the last day of the exhibition, Nakahira tore down and destroyed most of the photographs. While it could be said that he performed this demolition due to a conflict that aroused between the artist and the exhibition organizers, the act carries a deeper meaning within the context of his artistic career.²

_____ Criticizing the art world of that time for being a self-serving system that operates within, and feeds off the market it proclaims to oppose,





PARIS
12. Oct. 1971

PARIS

la prison

EXPLOSION

LA GUERRE
D'ESPAGNE

CIRCULATION

gnobl

THEATRE
CINEMA
MUSIC

la mort

VIVA
LA
MORTE!

COMMUNISTES
CHINOIS





Nakahira initially refused to participate in the Biennial. After some convincing, he agreed to participate, but refused to be positioned as the provider of art goods. He arrived without objects to present. The exhibition was designed through the extension of the artist's physical and mental limits. The process—taking pictures by day, developing them by night, hanging and re-organizing them each morning—presented the repeated reconstruction of self-consciousness that escaped prescribed subjectivity.³ The work's finalization as (an almost) complete destruction can be understood as Nakahira active refusal to the Capitalist ideology, which vehicles artists'

a sense of urgency that defined the Tokyo-based group that produced the magazine *Provoke*. *Provoke*, of which Nakahira was one of its founders, operated for only nine months, but became a highly influential force, both stylistically and critically within Japanese cultural discourse. Now, it is the center of the exhibition *Provoke: Photography in Japan between Protest and Performance, 1960–1975*, also featured at the Art Institute of Chicago in the lower galleries.⁶ While this concurrent exhibition is of a truly exciting historical wealth, it cannot be viewed through same lens as *Circulation*, and therefore will not be discussed. Not only is Nakahira's

original *mechanism* of the exhibition, redirecting its energy to at once construct and deconstruct institutional circulations. This description is accompanied by a more standard wall text that provides the project's historical context. The final lines read: "This full reconstruction of *Circulation*, the first ever attempted, took several years to research and six months to print. It can be understood as part archeology, part reenactment. Just as in 1971, it will be destroyed at the end of the exhibition." Lastly, a portfolio file holds an "illustrated diary," which portrays the material construction of the show, placed on the cinderblock desk.⁸ The portfolio, divided into

“The process—taking pictures by day, developing them by night, hanging and re-organizing them each morning—presented the repeated reconstruction of self-consciousness that escaped prescribed subjectivity.”

authorship and subjectivity for pure profit.⁴

— Uniting content with form, Nakahira attained the goals he put on the image together with his fellow *Provoke* group member few years earlier: "The image in itself is not an idea. It cannot attain the totality of a concept, nor can it be a commutative sign like a word. Its irreversible materiality—a reality that has been detached by the camera—exists in a world opposite that of language, and because of this it sometimes provokes the world of language and concepts... We as photographers must capture with our own eyes fragments of reality that can no longer be grasped through existing language, and must actively put forth materials that address language and ideas."⁵

— This exhibition presents, or rather reenacts,

exhibition presented in a different wing of the museum—to the point that a visitor can go through one exhibit, and avoid or miss the other—moreover, it features vastly different curatorial intentions.

— Firstly, the exhibition resurrects 1970s aesthetics and installation decisions, whose looseness, economy, and vitality are rarely seen in today's museums. Second, it features a wall text that outlines (in a highly technical manner) the reprinting and rearranging process that went into this exhibition.⁷ This wall text hints on the curatorial intention to expose a self-reflective circulation; not a circulation of encounters, dates, places, and events, but one of museum matter. The matter here is both archival and performative. The project was excavated not only to re-perform Nakahira's original piece, but also to activate the

seven parts, constructs a full picture of the very real, human, and international labor that went into the production of the show. Most interesting is the reading through sections "Research," "Making Plans," and "Printing," which traces the laborious and tedious work of the printer (and recent Columbia College Chicago graduate) Brittany Kumpfer, who was put to task in order to reconstruct the exact original conditions for the reproduction of the prints. The archival material includes not only Kumpfer's email correspondence with the Senior Conservator of Photographs at the Art Institute, Sylvie Pénichon—which discusses alternative photo processes, paper types, chemicals, and labor contracts—but also scans of notes, handwritten schedules, diary entries, and two drafts of her final work-report. The latter is presented in the



review-mode of a Microsoft Word document, with comments from a supervisor, perhaps the Senior Curator. I find the reading interesting because to most people, I imagine, it is quite boring. The overwhelmingly technical discussions are at risk of approaching total obscurity to the general reader. —

These elements reveal the exhibition's deeper intentions—performing photography as an act of archeology, and reenactment itself. In place of discussing the historic analysis of the original project, it presents its own circulation. I question the symbolic value of this action in a museum today: the gesture towards a historical production, and a subsequent destruction. I specifically wonder regarding the reenactment of these energies, and their unavoidable collision with the archeological urge that fetishizes the reconstruction of the original. And yet, Nakahira found, perhaps not fully, a way out; a path that allowed him to oppose to Capitalism. Since I cannot imagine any of these original energies surviving a second at the Art Institute of Chicago, I wonder what we are looking at. A ghost? A tomb? An unfulfilled horizon?

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Takuma Nakahira, *Circulation*, at the Art Institute of Chicago ran from January 28–April 30, 2017.

IMAGES:

Installation view of *Takuma Nakahira: Circulation*. Photography courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago

- 1 This material quality was probably achieved with a mediated out of focus or the intentional move of the camera at the release of the shutter.
- 2 Later on, in 1973, Nakahira intentionally burned down most of his negatives and prints, in a material and symbolic gesture that aimed to free him from the past. This may indicate that destruction for Nakahira had an equal creative drive to creation.
- 3 In his essay, entitled "Self-Change In The Act of Shooting," Nakahira writes, "... when I encounter afresh the world of reality, my own self-consciousness is dismantled; the act of rebuilding the consciousness has been imposed on me endlessly. That, in a way, has been my fate as a photographer." Vartanian, Ivan, Akihiro Hatanaka, and Yutaka Kanbayashi. 2006. *Setting Sun: Writings by Japanese Photographers*. New York: Aperture, p. 86.
- 4 Fifteen original prints escaped the destruction, and are presented framed on the gallery walls.
- 5 *Provoke* 1, November 1968: Trans. Christopher Stephens, From *Postwar to Postmodernism: Art in Japan 1945 – 1989*, Ed. Doryun Chong, Michio Hayashi, Fumihiko Sumitomo, Kenji Kajiya, p. 214, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2012
- 6 The exhibition is accompanied by a wonderful 680 pages long catalogue, that carries the same title.
- 7 Here are some excerpts of the text: "574 images made up *Circulation* on October 18, 1971 on its final day. 253 images were reprinted at original size from corresponding negatives...most new prints were cropped, "dodged," or burned...74 images appear on installation views at sufficient size to permit full-size printing with an enlargement of 28 percent or less..."
- 8 The portfolio file is placed next to the book *Takuma Nakahira, Circulation: Date, Place, Events*, and the Summer 2015 Issue of *Aperture* magazine, which focused on Tokyo. The three objects create a reading / research desk.