
Three Essays by Nakahira Takuma

Translated by Franz K. Prichard

Has Photography Been Able to Provoke Language?

I previously wrote the following about image and language: “At one time it was declared that images had an independent meaning in themselves opposed to language, and a ‘language of images’ was spoken about as though it were real. Yet, these notions are surely mistaken. Images haunt language like a shadow, they line language and give it substance, and in some cases, they bring about the expansion of language.”¹

This over zealous manner of speech may amount to pretentiousness however, my thinking basically remains unchanged even today. In fact, at the time I wrote that essay, I had just published the coterie magazine *Provoke* that my four associates and I presumptuously subtitled “Provocative Materials for Thought.” I was overly concerned that the word “thought” had too much of a political or philosophical resonance and argued that it should be replaced by the more precise phrase “language as thought.”

In nearly two years, have the photographs presented in *Provoke* been able to *revive* language in the end? Regrettably, my answer to this question would have to be rather negative. However, first I must clarify precisely what I meant by the language and image I argued should be revived. This question has returned to confront me once again.

What exactly are these hordes of words packed together like sardines and tightly lined up inside dictionaries? While it is clear that this is a language culled and recognized by history as the minimum level of universal symbols, we cannot naturally accept it as a lived language right off the bat. I don’t know when, but a strange delusion has taken up residence in some corner of my brain that I cannot shake free. I imagine that once the dictionary has been left closed up on my desk, among these carefully arranged, properly straightened-up swarms of printed words—which so ordered, afford no deep feeling—each letter and each word assert its own legitimacy one by one, and a massive brawl ensues. It is then, in these energetically clandestine maneuvers, that the words regain their innate impact as a language. But once I reach out for the dictionary, the words, having perceived me, swiftly return to their ordered state, that is to say, their dead, “constricted” state. Of course this is clearly a childish demented fantasy.

To the extent that it cannot live without people, language consists

Translator’s Notes:

1. Nakahira Takuma, “Shashin wa kotoba o sosei shiuruka” [Can Photography Revive Language?] *Nihon Dokusho Shimibun*, September 30th, 1968. *Nihon Dokusho Shimibun* [Japanese Reader’s Newspaper] was a weekly newspaper that played a significant role in fostering critical discussions of radical thought and practice during the height of the 1960s within the Japanese New Left and beyond.

of mere symbols that vaguely indicate that a tree is a tree; only through human use can a language be given life. Thus the words in a dictionary which are extracted from mere relational concepts, are things that transform themselves into what Roland Barthes calls “exploding words,” and “a vertically rising up language.”

Barthes writes, “The bursting upon us of the poetic word then institutes an absolute object; Nature becomes a succession of verticalities, of objects, suddenly standing erect, and filled with all their possibilities.”² Although what he is describing directly here is the nature of language in contemporary poetry, we can still say that this demonstrates exactly what lived language is within the history of the present.

No matter how much it may have been ingeniously assembled and developed, universal language, which from the start is embedded within relational concepts, is now unable to grasp the world today. This kind of language is deeply rooted in the arrogance of modern rationalism that says it can be linked within the organic relationships of the world.

On the contrary, lived language is absolutely not universal language, a language that presupposes such relationships. It would be a discourse “full of terror” (Barthes) that towers before us in the here and now, discarding relationships with a totality. By merely existing or just by being able to be uttered, they are words, like isolated “objects” filled with madness that can shake a person. They cannot be the continuous, accessible language that presupposes communication with others. This kind of “exploding language” is a language that has been fiercely lived here and now by a single person.

Images are always images about something; an image fixed to film that refers to something existing here and now. It is not reality itself but at most emerges from a veritable relation of correspondence with reality. Thus, no matter how much an image “does not resemble” reality, the relation with “it” is always narrowly retained.

However, this is not saying that the image is merely for the self-evident and trivial proof of the pointless fact that a tree is a tree. On the contrary, when we say the word “tree,” which is not a particular tree in reality, we only see the meaning of trees in general. Yet, by meticulously looking at a single tree here before us “now,” the word tree we had, together with the concept and meaning it held, is slowly forced to disintegrate. Thus, I am describing a kind of image that as a result of this process expands the truth that the word tree has for the individual viewer.

The camera undoubtedly fixes the tree as a tree upon the film according to optical laws. For this reason, the image is occasionally confused with actual reality. Photographs like those used as proofs of identity are just one example of this. Yet this is the point at which the “when, where and who” of the encounter with the tree is completely forgotten. This is true not just for identification photographs but for those in photojournalism and documentary film who espouse this or that realism. But ultimately, can there be a universal, objective tree?

Certainly there may be such a tree, but to the extent that I cannot by chance be there, the tree would have no meaning, and when all is said

2. Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968), 50.

and done, would have no relation to human existence. That single tree comes into being only according to the person who sees it. In the same way, what is real is what materializes as something real for me, right here and right now.

Once Godard defined the films he makes as “chanced reality,” which hits the mark in describing these relations. It is not reality itself but a second reality that has been transformed and made subjective by my confrontation with it. That is what an image is.

To repeat myself, a photographer photographing a single tree cannot live without relation to the word tree. While obsessing over the word tree like a compulsive thought, as the photographer fixes his gaze on the tree in the real world within the camera’s finder, that word suddenly crumbles away, and he becomes a part of its rebirth as a new tree (it is in the true sense of the word, “real”).

That said, how about someone looking at an image of a single tree? They cannot expect to have the same experience as the photographer’s encounter, of course. For, that kind of influence, (the very word is rooted in continuity), cannot be sought in a single photograph. Just as for the photographer who cited that tree from reality and amplified that word within himself, a single photograph of a tree merely opens up to each individual looking at it for their own re-quotation. In the end, whether the words of each person looking at the tree within a single photograph are amplified or not depends on the depth of its connection with the language of the person looking. Indeed, the level of the image is tightly connected to the level of language.

It seems *Provoke* has carried out one of its missions. *Provoke* has reversed the image as the self-evident and pointless proof that a tree is a tree, and on the contrary, has presented images that raise uncertainty about the fixed meanings of verisimilitude, albeit rather slowly. Yet, even this has fallen into a kind of minor fashion now. By fashion here I do not mean merely that it has become customary, but rather I am referring to the bodies and minds of each one of us who have become satisfied with this. Extremely grainy images and intentionally unfocused photographs in particular, have already become mere decoration.

Today, we must return to our point of departure. I cannot say clearly what form my response to these doubts will ultimately take. Yet perhaps by having made clear a tree is a tree, it must be something that expands the amplitude of the word tree that has been produced by nothing more than my confrontation with it here and now.

However, it is time to be tested again to see how far this can go.

First published as “Shashin wa gengo o chōhatsu shieta ka” [“Has Photography Been Able to Provoke Language?”] in *Nihon Dokusho Shimibun* [Japanese Reader’s Newspaper], March 30, 1970. It later appeared in *Kitarubeki kotoba no tame ni* [For a Language to Come] as “Eizō/Kotoba” [“Image, Language”], and also in *Naze, shokubutsu zukan ka* [Why an Illustrated Botanical Dictionary] with minor revisions by the author. This translation is based upon the version appearing in *Why an Illustrated Botanical Dictionary?*

Rebellion Against the Landscape: Fire at the Limits of my Perpetual Gazing . . .

Although I have been given the topic of urban rebellion, to speak about this as a purely strategic or tactical problem not only exceeds the limits of my ability, but is also something the editors would not have asked of me. If they were looking for that, there are experts who could properly address this.

Yet, the words urban and rebellion, when put together in this combination, have a strangely alluring resonance that fills my heart with excitement. Urban and rebellion, somehow these words stir up an image within me that must be at night, where a fire burns bright red, as if to make the night exist all the darker. In addition, it must be filled with terror and disquiet. Described in this manner, my image of urban rebellion is very common place, something that can all too easily be related to any of the spectacles like that of the Shinjuku riot on October 21st 1968, from ten to twelve p.m., and the scene around Kamata Station on the evening of November 16th 1969.¹ Even so, why do I always imagine a fire? And why night?

The prominent film critic Matsuda Masao once wrote of Nagayama Norio, the so-called “serial shooting devil,” that he wandered about from place to place in order to slash apart the uniformly sealed-up “landscape” sustained by power itself, which unfolded before his eyes wherever he was, and discovered the sound of a single gunshot within himself.² For me too, the world only appears before my eyes as a solid “landscape,” lustrous like plastic. While this certainly does not bode well for my body and my senses, I could also say that it is precisely for this reason that I continue to take photographs. In fact, the city cannot exist without this “landscape.” No, on the contrary, the city is somehow the “landscape” itself. People often comment on the violence and disorder of cities, particularly Tokyo, but this is nothing more than a *frame-up* of journalism and the social sciences. Although every night murders and

Translator's Notes:

1. The Shinjuku riots of 1968 erupted when protestors besieged Shinjuku station to protest the refueling of US war planes in Japan on the way to the Vietnam War in honor of International Anti-War Day. Another violent clash erupted at Kamata station in 1969, near Tokyo's Haneda airport, where protestors attempted to disrupt Prime Minister Satō's visit to the US.

2. Film critic Matsuda Masao (1933-), first described this notion of “landscape” in a 1970 article detailing his experience of making the film “AKA Serial Killer,” together with Adachi Masao (1939-), Sasaki Mamoru (1936-2006), and others which took Nagayama Norio as its subject. Nagayama (1949-1997) was a Hokkaidō-born, rural youth that shot and killed four people (two security guards and two taxi drivers) in a one-month period in the fall of 1968 with a pistol stolen from the U.S. Naval Base in Yokosuka. He soon became a critically acclaimed writer in prison and was subject to a long-lasting legal battle to challenge his death sentence which was carried out in 1997. The film consists of a powerful free jazz soundtrack and the scenes that Nagayama would have seen along his ceaselessly shifting trajectory of wandering within and beyond Japan. The 1970 articles by Matsuda on the making of this film were the direct impetus of the emergence of a so-called “discourse of landscape” (*fūkei-ron*) that spanned the fields of film, photography, theater, literature and architecture in the early 1970s. As Nakahira's essay demonstrates, the central aspect of this notion of “landscape” was a concern for the diverse material and spiritual forms of state-power born in the expanded scale of capitalist urbanization manifested in the late 1960s.

traffic accidents occur in the city and the industrial complexes spew forth poisonous gasses that shorten the lives of thousands of citizens bit a bit, these descriptions are merely those of natural selection, pre-established harmonies that misrecognize the real nature of the city. Beyond being somewhat chaotic, somewhat poisonous, the actual city continues to exist today as a transparent “landscape,” enduring without a single scratch. Then at night the city wipes clean all impurities, acquiring a nearly flawless kind of beauty. It becomes an impregnable fortress, lacking even a single weakness. However, it is exactly because of its unassailability that I must set this “landscape” confronting me aflame with my own hands. A fire all my own; this fire is the final shape that my unshakable sentiments can take. Thereafter, all that remains is the problem of methodical tactics (but those of revolution, not rebellion).

A day will come when a single crack will nick this “landscape” which is uniformly covered over with expressionless smoothness, and a fissure will gradually deepen until this “landscape” is completely turned inside out like a glove being taken off. There will undoubtedly be a revolt. When that time comes, the “landscape” will already not be a “landscape,” but will instead become a crucible of confusion, trampled over by the bare feet of vivid human kind. The fire will engulf the entire surface of the city. There, people will run amok. Fire and darkness. Barefoot people running around recklessly. In ancient times, people must have scrambled about in the midst of fire and darkness barefoot. It’s an old fashioned image but when I envision urban rebellion, this is the scene I always imagine.

From the year before last to the end of last year, giant waves of student power gave signs of urban revolt, however slight. But since then, they appear to have rapidly grown calm. No matter how much we lament this fact, nothing will come of it. The problem now is what was the point of that one fissure and how can we make that crack even larger? For example, what exactly occurred on January 19th 1969 in the temporarily realized “liberated district” of the Kanda *Quartier Latin*?³ Was the liberated district literally liberated? Was it a base of operations that should continue to be expanded? Or was it a free space that had already achieved liberation itself?

The “wrapping maniac” Christo will come from New York to join the Mainichi International Art Exhibition that began on the tenth of May. (I said “will,” because when I wrote this manuscript on the first of May, I had not yet heard that he had come to Japan already). He got his start by making a barricade of oilcans on a city street corner, calling it his own artwork, and then he began his urban packaging using aerial photos of a city (New York) to make a montage. He gradually became engrossed in his dream of wrapping, and as montage photos became unsatisfactory, he began wrapping up buildings with vinyl in the actual city, tying them up with rope. Beginning with his work in many museums, and most recently

3. The so-called Kanda *Quartier Latin*, (also called the Kanda liberated district in Japanese), was a student barricade of Meiji Boulevard inspired by the events of May 1968 in Paris. A group of student activists blocked off a major street in central Tokyo near Meiji University, Nihon University and Chūō University, during the violent police assaults on Yasuda Hall in Tokyo University, then occupied by *Zenkyōtō* student activists, (“All-Campus Joint Struggle,” a major decentralized student activist network dominant at the time).

in Australia, where he wrapped up tens of kilometers of coastline, what he clearly sought was to make the public and historical city into private property by wrapping up the city. The important thing is that as a possession, it was possible to seal off and paralyze the functions of the city. He didn't "make" anything in the usual sense, but by obstructing that order (the landscape is in fact precisely an order) and sealing it off, I think he did more than "make" something.

Christo's wrapping series immediately makes me think of the barricades of the students. The students realize their "statement of protest" by blockading the buildings in their universities. By sealing off the public university, which as the system that encompasses them is a "landscape," they attempt to make it into a private possession. The logic that supports this strategy is surely the same as Christo's. The differences between Christo wrapping for his own so-called conceptual art work and the student's blockade as a direct protest against power rather than as an artwork, is not really a big difference. For in the end, an artwork is the trace of the life of an artist, who is strictly speaking someone who lived intensely, and the blockade was carried out as an inevitable gesture of the students' "statement of protest." What they both share is the fact that they made their starting point by engaging their environments, (the world that encompasses them as the "landscape" confronting them), whether the city or the university campus, blockading and wrapping the "landscape" up in order to cut into it and blast it apart.

The desperate struggle of diverse individuals to personally possess the public, historical city (and that which sustains it is power itself) for themselves, this is the real substance of urban rebellion when this effort is materialized. Returning to the liberated district, it was definitely not a space that had achieved liberation by itself. As proof of this, their liberated district was temporary and localized; because from the beginning it emerged in tense relations with the exterior "landscape" that enveloped them. They barely put a single little crack in the totally dominating "landscape." Yet by means of that crack, the structure of the world has been *manifested* as something all the more clear for the first time. The coast has been actualized as the coast, the city as the city, only by being wrapped up by Christo. The students inversely expose the true form of the university by blockade, sealing off their campuses.

In Michelangelo Antonioni's film *Zabriskie Point*, a young woman whose lover has been killed by the police escapes a towering city in Death Valley (actually, a single building) and in the instant she looks back on this city, by means of her hostile glance, the magnificent city is blown up. Yet can a hateful glance blast apart a city and cut up the "landscape" or not? This is a very acute question for me as a professional photographer.

Today, the world exists as an expressionless, uniform "landscape" before me. Moreover, becoming increasingly beautiful, its coherence will become progressively more perfect. To tell the truth, I am a scrawny dog sniffing about for a weak rift that may not even exist; what I seek is the remote possibility of a single crack in this complete "landscape." Is there no hidden crevice that gives me a sign that there is a crack in this flattened, beautiful "landscape?" If I could only find such a crevice, the city as "landscape" would be destroyed by my angry gaze, just like the "city of the dunes" broken into thousands of pieces in Antonioni's film.

This is just a crazy delusion however. There is no such fissure or anything like it. Perhaps such an opening can only be revealed by fire, by stone or by rifle.

For the time being, there is no other method for me than to ceaselessly gaze at this “landscape.” Yet, at the limits of my perpetual gazing, could a fire, my real fire, be igniting? I won’t know without trying. What I can say for sure is that this is only possible through my complete transformation into this very same fire of mine. After all, seeing is unrelated to doing. This is true even if doing something becomes clear only by first seeing something.

Urban rebellion. It is an unlimited personal act of aggression against the “landscape.” It is the realization of the dream that has been endlessly repeated by each person to somehow change the political system (a system that cannot be expected to change on its own).

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Looking at the City or, the Look from the City

It can no longer be recovered. Whenever I am presented with the photographs of Eugène Atget I am overcome with this feeling. For a very long time I have tried to figure out exactly where it comes from. This is also the main reason why I am attracted to Atget. Yet, now that I am compelled to write about Atget once more, it would be no use to merely describe these vague sorts of impressions.

Eugène Atget, who in the midst of destitution ceaselessly took photographs of the streets of fin-de-siècle Paris, eking out a living by selling these as “documents for artists,” died alone in obscurity and poverty, an artisan of photography. Furthermore, there is Atget who after his death became a tremendous influence on the surrealist movement. This has even become a kind of myth. These humanistic aspects of Atget have been described by many people starting with Bernice Abbot and will be a story handed down for generations hereafter. But with my extremely personal feelings of attraction to Atget as my only lead, I will instead think about Eugène Atget, and moreover, what photography exactly is.

This “irrecoverable sensation” I feel when looking at Atget’s photographs may certainly emanate from the spatial and temporal gulf between fin-de-siècle Paris and myself in the present. But if it was merely this, then we know of many photographs besides Atget’s that have this kind of nostalgia, or those that entice our yearning for far off places. The sole value of these prevalent banal photographs is derived by transporting ever older, ever more distant things through the photograph to us in the present.

Unlike these, Atget’s photographs each go beyond this enormous

gulf of space and time, and while I am entangled with the remote memories of the experience of having encountered and seen this scene somewhere during my not-so-short life, I am brutally confronted with the “irrecoverable” thought of having never been to *this* scene, *this* street captured by Atget. Or in other words, Atget’s is a kind of photography where in the end, I am thoroughly ejected from these streets, these material objects. What I described by saying, “it can no longer be recovered” comes from the connotation of this sensation of rejection. Surely I have seen this sort of sculpture in a park somewhere, seen a sculpture and trees reflected in the surface of a pond in the same way, surely I have felt the midsummer rays of sunlight pour upon me, filtering through the trees just like this. I have a childhood memory of drifting through a place just like these antiquated streets, passing along a surface just like these stain-saturated walls. But no matter what, *these* branch filtered rays of sunlight, *these* streets of Atget are absolutely not my own.

In the end, the images of Atget reject my own memories and feelings; the streets indifferently stare back at me as streets and the material objects stare back as objects. In these images my attempts to ascribe significance or sentimentalize cannot penetrate into them. They entwine themselves within my memories, and yet ultimately they reject these completely with a kind of twisting. Atget’s photographs hang suspended in midair between this kind of attraction-*catharsis* and repulsion-alienation. This is where the unique characteristic of Atget’s photography lies.

Be that as it may, there are no human figures in Atget’s photographs. As Walter Benjamin aptly pointed out, they are like “scenes of a crime.” Even when people appear in them, they are stripped of personality, and most have somehow been completely embedded within the city or within material objects themselves. The streets, the people and the material objects are dead silent, as entirely identical elements, each stripped of their individual shadows. They are completely disillusioning, like when one peeks through pale florescent light into the world beyond the glass of the fish tanks lined up in an aquarium. This is what instills terror in their viewer.

However, what is seeing exactly? I understand the fact that seeing is to possess and give meaning to the world according to the process of establishing a secured distance between myself and the subject, reducing the world to a subject which must be something visible. But what happens if this distance disintegrates? All this will be a bit personal, but a few years ago I was hospitalized for close to a month with a condition of a constant sensory abnormality that was brought about as a result of my habitual use of sleeping pills, which I had been taking for insomnia. It is difficult to briefly describe the hallucinations I had at the time. I call them hallucinations, yet it was not that I was having visions of something that was not there. This condition was instead the disintegration of this sense of distance, the loss of the balance that maintains the relationships between material reality and myself.

For example, if I was at a café talking with a friend, I would suddenly notice that there was a glass on the table. In that instant, I could not ascertain the distance between the glass and myself. As a result, I was unable to recognize the glass as a glass. Once seized by the attack, I became seemingly immobilized with terror, and although at the time I

completely lost the composure to be able to analyze indifferently what was happening, later I would look back and realize that this was exactly what was happening.

Looking out at the scenery beyond a train window, suddenly material reality would come at me and directly pierce my eyes. In order to protect myself within the train car speeding on, (the anxiety that I was unable to control myself and would leap out the window was very strong), I had to close my eyes and tightly clutch the armrest. Under this kind of sensory abnormality, I firmly believed that consciousness was a mass of scar tissue from the wounds inflicted by material things directly upon my eyes or my retina. For seeing material things meant that they would directly stab into my eyes. No longer able to go out and walk the streets, I was thus hospitalized. It's not as though this anxiety has been eliminated, for even now my consciousness is taken over by that of a sick person's. Therefore, isn't "seeing" exactly the act described by the reversed expression, "material reality would come at me stabbing?" While looking at Atget's photobook, *Paris du Temps Perdu* I suddenly recalled all of this.

I've written the phrase "Eugène Atget's photography" nonchalantly before. But it would be more appropriate to say "the worlds that occasionally entered the camera operated by a professional artisan of photography named Eugène Atget." That is to say, Atget did not take photographs according to a pre-determined image that Atget himself had. He turned the camera towards all objects and all the streets of Paris. These were without fail then fused upon dry plates in accordance with the laws of optics. We cannot ignore the conditions of the development of film and the camera at the time, of the era, that shaped the characteristics of his photography. He had to take long exposures with low sensitivity film, which completely removed people's forms. This also made it impossible to take photographs at night. Thus, these photographs that resemble "scenes of a crime," were in no way the realization, the representation of pre-determined images he had in mind. They became that way out of necessity. It is an undeniable fact that the level of technological advancement in photography of that era decided the nature of Atget's photographic images. In this sense too, his photographs were not photographs that had been permeated by his own consciousness. Instead, it was the elements that Atget was not conscious of, the elements of the unconscious, which decided the nature of his photographs. The fact that we are moved when we see his photographs is precisely because the world ruled by this "unconscious" conveyed through Atget's camera stirs our consciousnesses even today. Walter Benjamin aptly grasps something like this in his "Little History of Photography."

No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it. *For it is another nature which speaks to the camera rather than to the eye: "other" above all in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a*

Of course it is obvious here that nature does not mean what is called the natural world or trees and plants. In Atget's case, "nature" could be substituted with the words "the city," or "material reality." I wrote before that I feel that I cannot enter into Atget's photos. But this is due to the close relationship between feeling the naked hostile stare of material reality and the sense of disorientation we feel encountering a world exceeding all "human significance" that we have forced upon it. A world which was produced conversely from the fact that Atget always shot photographs as an artisan, discarding all a priori images of the world. The resulting influence of Atget on the surrealists, and on the contrary, what drew the attention of the surrealist artists to Atget's photographs, was due to these acts of differentiation and the defamiliarization effects they produced.

If we consider that what gave rise to surrealism as a movement was an era that had begun to fundamentally question all values in the wake of the collapse of the world as a pre-established harmony following World War I, we can fully comprehend the fact that in order to reexamine the world and their own positions in it, young artists set out to return material things to the world of material things and to question piece by piece the entire system of meanings, values and images that had been historically constructed up to that point in time. It was also an effort to rescue humanity by rightly locating humanity's position in the world through the act of thrusting things distinctly back to the side of material things. Considered in this way, we can perhaps begin to understand why Eugène Atget's photographs began to receive the attention of the surrealists. The illusory atmosphere and surrealistic sensation that wafts through the photographic images of Atget emerge from the naked material things that peer out from the fissures of humanistic meaning.

However, photographers since Atget, the so-called photographers as the "authors" of modernity, have taken a completely different direction away from Eugène Atget. That is, their struggle to remake the world in accordance to their images, holding onto their own personal private images of it in order to establish their selves as "artists," is demonstrated by history. We could say this of many photographers including Alvin Langdon Coburn's abstractionism, László Moholy-Nagy's photograms, Albert Renger-Patzsch's *Neue Sachlichkeit* ("New Objectivity") and Edward Weston of Group f/64 as well to name a few at random.

Nagy, Patzsch and Weston have certainly struggled to expand our field of view by turning their eye on the minute parts of reality and material objects to present and enlarge them. But ultimately these merely culminated in dressing up reality with another new aesthetics and image. Furthermore, the so-called straight photography of photojournalists and reportage photographers such as Alfred Stieglitz, Edward Steichen and Dorothea Lange, seek out from reality the meanings of "poverty" and "suffering" to merely extract and display literally whatever meanings they presume to find therein. Of course this is putting it a bit strongly.

Translator's Note:

1. Emphasis is Nakahira's. Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography" in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 2, 1927-1934* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001), 510.

There must be a more suitable commentator on these histories than me. But if I might dare to state my own biases, among the century long history of photography, I think the only person comparable to Eugène Atget is Walker Evans who photographed the impoverishment of American rural areas following the Great Depression of 1929.

The real question is what is the photographer exactly? As a photographer myself, whenever I think about Eugène Atget I always end up facing this question. This also raises the question, does the photographer as “author” exist? Clearly photographers do exist today as vocational specialists, I myself am a petty ranking member of these. Yet, if we consider that the “author” is someone who literally “produces” the world by asserting the “self,” there is no need for the photographer as author to exist. This should be clear from what I have already written on Atget thus far. Precisely because he did not have his own image, Atget succeeded in invoking the world and reality. Because he lacked any a priori images, Atget laid bare the world as the world. But for us, who already “fully know” the world all too well, can we still nakedly manifest reality like this or not? If we suppose it is possible, then there is no other way than to start out by first discarding one’s self.

Ben Vautier, the contemporary French artist that fervently writes slogans, said, “If one intends to change the world, to change art, first they must discard their own ego’s.” That’s it exactly. It is no longer possible for the photographer to gain anything by asserting the individual self. By doing so, this is merely the story of how one at most might be able to succeed in joining the ranks of those photographers of the system and the artists of the system found in the continuously drifting course of photographic history. Ultimately, however, these have been enclosed by these systems, given the so-called official approval as the “sacred artist.” In a lecture entitled “Literature as Institution,” Hans Magnus Enzensberger notes that until the era of Guy de Maupassant, literature possessed a certain normative social capacity—the power to influence the shared sense of material values, aesthetics, morals—yet in the 20th century, with the growth of productive capacities that brought forth a variety of mass media, like photography, radio and television, literature lost the power to regulate the consciousnesses of the masses; the unconscious. What’s more, he describes the literature that can still endure today as “the literature of the catacombs,” that has become the prized possession of an extremely limited and privileged few. This precisely indicates the state of photography and of photographers to come from now on.

Photography “as art” will be placed in the hands of a privileged few. And at the same time, this sort of art-photography will become increasingly divorced from reality and history, and in proportion, acquire an increasingly “sacred” character. However, these few will not be able to obtain the potentiality that photography has by its very nature, to expand our perceptions, and to lay the world bare (precisely in the way that Atget’s photographs do). On the contrary, it is certain that the intrinsic function of photography will be grasped by the masses more strongly than in recent photography, contingent upon the development of film technologies. I said the masses. This does not refer to the “amateurs,” the bad imitators of the “authors” of the day. These “amateurs” are the colossal reserve army of “authors.” They just carry

out the bad extended reproduction of the aesthetics and images brandished by the “author.” The masses I refer to precisely indicate the anonymous masses. It is within the specificity of photography’s intrinsic nature, for which it matters not who took the photograph but how it reveals the world, that photography will be evaluated and at the same time will acquire its true anonymity. The anonymity I speak of can only be achieved from within this kind of historical flow.

The discontinuation of *Life* magazine surely tells us one aspect of the fact that photography has been surpassed by television and other more advanced media. But to be more precise, the photographic method like that of *Life*, a form of communication where the reporter as the spokesperson of the masses unilaterally conveys “true reality” to the masses, has disintegrated as far as photography is concerned. This kind of form has been taken over by television in a much more centralized and monopolistic manner. That being said, does this not also suggest that photography, at least potentially, has drawn much closer to the side of the masses?

Will photography not proceed along the polarization between the photography of “the photographer within the catacombs” and the photography of the masses from now on? The photography of the masses will surely be a kind of photography like Eugène Atget’s photography. A photography assessed by how the world is condensed in its true form on film in an instant and not a photography assessed by how the world can be captured by the personal image of a single person. It is this sort of photography that will clearly display the intrinsic function of photography all the more on the horizon called “society.”

The first chapter of Eugène Atget’s photobook, *Paris du Temps Perdu* is entitled, “Looking at the City.” But now, this must be properly restated as “the Look from the City.” This is because these are not images of the city, 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.

In this sense, for us photographers, Eugène Atget persistently continues to ask us to return to the starting point and reconsider the questions, what is the photographer, what is photography?

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