

A Brief Introduction to Nakahira Takuma's "The Illusion Called the Documentary: From the Document to the Monument," 1972

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Abstract: This translation of photographer and critic Nakahira Takuma's (1938-2015) 1972 essay, "The Illusion Called the Documentary: From the Document to the Monument," illuminates a crucial shift in Nakahira's understanding of both the profound limitations—as well as the radical potential of—photography. The essay's contemporaneous insights into the role of photography during the infamous Asama-Sansō Incident in 1972 offers a crucial counter-perspective that remains absent from existing accounts of this incident. Nakahira's essay demonstrates a pivotal moment within the development of a radical discourse of media power in the year of Okinawa's Reversion to mainland Japanese rule, shedding light on an undercurrent of critical perspectives that continue to resonate in the contemporary moment.

Keywords: Photography, documentary, mass media, Asama Mountain Lodge Incident, *Provoke*, Okinawa's Reversion.

The work of critic and photographer Nakahira Takuma (1938-2015) has received a curiously

partial reception in the decades since the late 1960s and 1970s. Although active as a photographer until his death in 2015, Nakahira has largely been celebrated for his legendary role in defining an *are-bure-boke* photography (rough or grainy, shaken, and out of focus) as cofounder of *Provoke* in the late 1960s, an influential Japanese photography magazine synonymous with this style (now almost exclusively identified with *Provoke* contributor Moriyama Daidō). Curiously, despite this "legendary" status, the critical significance of Nakahira's writings and his post-*Provoke* photography have escaped critical attention both in Japan and worldwide, until recently. Important exhibitions in Japan and the US, as well as re-publications of Nakahira's major works in Japan have laid the ground a deeper appreciation of the scope of Nakahira's photographic praxis as a mode of radical critique for a global audience.¹

However, as this essay demonstrates in vivid ways, Nakahira's practice as a photographer was deeply invested in the expansion of the critical vocabularies of the radical left in Japan from at least 1967 to 1977 when Nakahira ceased writing. What's more, this essay illuminates a crucial shift in Nakahira's understanding of both the limitations and potentials of photography that have much to offer scholars, students, and readers interested in the changing contours of power and critique

materialized by image media. Importantly, we find Nakahira directly problematizing *Provoke's* reception as a kind of oppositional aesthetic style and co-option in the infamous “Discover Japan” advertising campaign for the national railways in 1970.² What’s more, the essay reveals how Nakahira’s move away from *Provoke* was part of his efforts to grasp the entangled ways that Japanese nation-state and capital mobilized image media in the state’s violent suppression of oppositional social movements and the induction of commodified and complicit desires that would become the hallmark of a burgeoning “depoliticization” of media culture in the late 1970s.

The predominance of historical narratives that recount the “end of the radical left” and the “rise of consumer culture” in Japan’s 1970s has by now become a cliché in dominant understandings of this period. The year 2022 marks the 50th anniversary of the 1972 Asama Mountain Villa incident which plays a key role in the periodization of these narratives. The essay’s contemporaneous insights into the role of the iconic image of the mountain villa in solidifying this trope offer a crucial counter-perspective that remains absent from existing accounts of this incident. In addition, Nakahira’s essay demonstrates a pivotal moment within the development of a radical discourse of media power that has been discussed in recent English language scholarship.³ We also find Nakahira’s prescient engagement with Okinawa’s fraught reversion to mainland administrative rule and the clear influence of Frantz Fanon’s anti-colonial perspectives in ways that reveal the trans-regional horizons of Nakahira’s decisive contribution to the expanded vocabularies of leftist media criticism.

In the context of ever-growing interest in Japanese media and visual culture, much crucial perspective can be gleaned from the conceptual and political vocabularies of paradoxically celebrated-but-little-studied

figures like Nakahira. Moreover, readers will discover profoundly contemporary resonances in Nakahira’s essay amid a moment of reckoning with what we might call the age of a planetary “disinformation society.” A moment in which we are faced with the growth of violent authoritarian and fascist social movements that are sustained by unprecedented concentrations of corporate and state media power. Amid continued expansions of the state’s influence on Japanese media industries, as revealed by the spectacle of the pandemic Olympics and erasures of the ongoing TEPCO nuclear reactor meltdown disasters in Fukushima, Nakahira’s essay invites contemporary readers to reflect on the conditions of the “illusion called the documentary” within Japan and on a planetary scale today.

The Illusion Called the Documentary: From the Document to the Monument

By Nakahira Takuma (1938-2015)

Part One

A photograph is a documentary record (*kiroku*). This has been a consistent claim from the moment of photography’s invention to the present, long believed to be the primary material premise of photography. Certainly, the thesis that a photograph is a documentary record is itself an irrefutably obvious fact, at least when we consider the photo-chemical mechanisms of film and camera. It becomes an even more obvious fact that a photograph is a documentary record when we consider the logical contradictions that emerge with the word image (*eizō*) by contrast, because an image can both refer to some external material reality as well as exist independently from external material reality. The process that determines a photograph is a photograph goes

beyond the consciousness of the photographer (or whoever is operating the camera) and depends solely on the potential for understanding between the viewer and taker of the photograph as to what is reproduced there—what the meanings of the things there are. At such moments, no one would harbor any doubt that a photograph is a documentary record.

Yet, once an unmediated link was forged between the physical and social properties of photography, and that link was uncritically accepted, hadn't the way already been paved for the crisis facing images in general today (not only photography, but also television and film)? In an era that could be described as that of an information society, hasn't this linkage become a decisive factor propelling the divorce of images from reality and their resultant fetishization, first and foremost within the depths of our minds, but also on the social level as well?

To put it a little more concretely, due to the presumed immediacy of photography's reflection of reality, we have succeeded in reducing the distance between us and reality remarkably. If photography has had any significant potential compared to other media it must be in this. The latent potential of the camera was transformed into an explicit form of power when photography, which had developed as a technology of reproduction from the start, combined together with multiple further technologies of reproduction like printing. This reproductive power succeeded in forcibly bringing realities once distant from individuals near and making them visible for countless readers through the circulations of print media. Afterwards, film and then television would take this on in more acute and more expanded forms, and with a spellbinding power that is almost impossible to escape from. These images lock us to reality insofar as they are proper likenesses of reality and largely force fed to each of us all at once as a set of

simultaneous occurrences.

Now, we unavoidably confront vast quantities of fragmentary realities generated in high volumes in countless amounts of print media, such as newspapers, magazines, advertising flyers, and catalogues, as well as in all-day TV broadcasts that are delivered to us each day. In a sense, there has never been an era where we have lived as thoroughly saturated by realities as we do today. If we limit ourselves to speaking schematically, that is. But it remains another question altogether whether these are realities each of us has actually been able to live. In fact, even before we consider this question, we must first consider how we are all too easily made to accept this short-circuit, believing that these likenesses of reality—which, by definition, are not reality—are reality itself, forgetting that images are just the appearances of reality, images cut out and divorced from reality. We must investigate this problem first.

Clearly, we are living inside a strange myth. It is the immanent logic that sustains the information era on our side, within each of us; an optical illusion that sees likenesses of reality, which are not reality, as reality. Or perhaps our straightforward confusion of the reality captured in images with reality, is deeply bound up in the historical construction of our senses where the basic, physical terms of photography that establish it as a documentary record have been enlarged to the scale of society. Of course, it is an illusion that is forced upon us by the workings of power within the system of contemporary capitalism itself. The "consciousness industries" mediate it all, managing all the information and selling it to us as commodities. The crucial thing is that images are always managed and processed as well. With other media like print media, the long history of printing has made it comparatively easy for us to educate ourselves to discern the language of industry as well as the language of the government, the nation-state to be precise, that ultimately sustains

industrial society with the information they produce. However, a mechanical faith in the documentary nature of photography has become implanted in ways which have proven difficult to rid ourselves of. We have all too easily disarmed ourselves to the problems of photography and images. But it's just like this. In capitalist society, despite the myth of universality that the bourgeoisie spread everywhere, we are inevitably divided into either exploiter or exploited. No reconciliation is possible between these two sides. This essential quality should be even more vividly clear in the image media of today's information society. Except, in entrusting our sensibilities to the one-dimensional documentary character of the image, believing that everything recorded actually happened, or even that the realities rendered through images are the only true ones, our very sensibilities completely obscure the ingenious trick the bourgeoisie have played on us. The choice is entirely in the hands of industry, capital, and the nation-state. The masses have been put in the one-sided position of consumers of information that have lost the circuits for reciprocal communication.

Even a single photograph taken by a photographer is the result of a selection. The reality reproduced there bears no resemblance to the reality that expands just a centimeter beyond the frame. It's just like the often-mentioned idea that photography does not create but selects. Images cannot come into being from nothing. But what happens when we move from that single, simple selection to being only shown realities that have been thoroughly selected for us by the enormous forces of organizations? What happens if we end up believing that their selected reality is reality? Wouldn't that unconditionally surrender all our freedom to them?

I wrote previously that the bourgeoisie, who emerge from class interests, create a state in the form of a nation to protect their profits. In so doing, they integrate all the dispossessed

within the nation-state by feeding us the illusion that we are part of the same nation, elevate the values of the bourgeois ruling class to the status of universal human values, and even dispossess us of our consciousness. It seems to me that there are strange parallels between the generalization of bourgeoisie values and the problem we currently confront, in the ingenious deceit of the information industry which compels us to believe that everything that is reproduced in images happened as it appears. Or perhaps it would be better to say that the crystallized expression of these parallel illusions emerged with the mass media, starting with the television. The sublimation of bourgeois values into humanity's universal values has been replaced with a universal reality rendered only through images of reality. At any rate, there is no mistake that this clever manipulation of the masses and the public exists in the guise of the universality of the ruling classes.

In his prominent theory of mass media, "Constituents of a Theory of the Media," Hans Magnus Enzensberger concludes his pointed, concrete analysis of the manipulation of people's consciousnesses made possible by the mass media and television images with the following.

The process of reproduction reacts on the object reproduced and alters it fundamentally. The effects of this have not yet been adequately explained epistemologically. The categorical uncertainties over whether something is real or fake to which it gives rise also destabilize the concept of the documentary. Strictly speaking, its usage has shrunk to its legal dimensions. A document is something the 'forging' --i.e. the reproduction--of which is punishable by imprisonment. [...]

The production of the electronic media, by

their nature, evade such distinctions as those between documentary and feature films. They are in every case explicitly determined by the given situation. The producer can never pretend, like the traditional novelist, 'to stand above things.' He is therefore partisan from the start. This fact finds formal expression in his techniques. Cutting, editing, dubbing--these are techniques for conscious manipulation without which discussions of new media would be inconceivable. It is precisely in these work processes that their productive power reveals itself--and there is no distinction to be made as to whether it's the production of reportage or the production of a comedy. The material, whether 'documentary' or 'fiction,' is in each case only a prototype, a half-finished article, and the more closely one examines its origins, the more blurred the difference becomes. (*The realities that have been placed before the camera are always staged realities, the moon landing is an example of this*).⁴

This is a long quote, but it deals with all of what I am saying here. The dissolution of the distinction between what is documentary and what is fictional described by Enzensberger is also clearly akin to the way that, while all documents of reality are documentary records, they are also all simultaneously fictionalized the moment they pass through the manipulations of the dominant media and are broadcast through the cathode ray tube of the television. While each fragment certainly contains a documented reality, they lack any form of orientation. Each documentary record of reality obtains their orientation and persuasiveness in the act of putting them together, and even prior to that, in the criteria for what to select or what not to select.

Let me provide a familiar example to illustrate. It was just two or three months ago that the United Red Army seized the Asama Mountain Villa and the television continuously broadcast an image of the lodge for more than a week, until they went live for an entire day to cover the "decisive battle," the day of the "storming of Asama Mountain Villa." The coverage received perhaps the highest television ratings ever, but it was the picture on the screen during the week-long TV broadcast leading up to the final day that interests me the most.



Translator's sketch of a photograph of the 1972 Asama Mountain Villa Incident. This less-than-faithful illustration of an image (not what it represents) is presented as a refusal to reproduce the workings of the "documentary illusion" that Nakahira describes in the essay. This approach is drawn from Ariella Azoulay who

illuminates the necessity of such refusals in her book, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*, (Verso, 2019).

The activities of the United Red Army could not be seen at all from the outside during their occupation of the mountain villa, as is now widely known. Each TV station broadcast a continuous picture from almost the same position looking up at the facade of the mountain villa in snow-covered Kita Karuizawa. The reporters would make comments like, “students have occupied the villa for 24 hours,” which became “students have occupied the villa for two days,” then “three days,” and so on with each passing day. Every station had the same picture shot from a mostly unchanged position. It would be impossible to say such documentary recordings of the incident were dramatic in any way. Even so, they tenaciously broadcast the exact same shot on the news each hour. The stations could only convey the same information that someone, some “criminals,” had seized the villa and taken hostages with a rifle or a pistol. However, people certainly noticed how, with the passing of time, the image of the facade of this mountain villa began to gradually take on a new quality within our minds. The persistent reproduction of a single static image came to enforce a particular moral meaning. That is, with each passing day, the “atrociousness of the criminals” gradually became more clearly defined for those watching from their living rooms. They became more and more “evil people” with each passing day. The moral compass of the sensible citizen had reached the conclusion that “it was only natural to kill the criminals” precisely by the time the police stormed the villa. The date and time of the raid’s execution was undoubtedly based on the thorough calculations of the police. Each TV station ended up fully collaborating with the police by broadcasting that picture. It makes almost no difference whether the media consciously or

unconsciously collaborated. The police carried out their “daring hostage rescue operation” based upon assumptions about the behavior of the mass media, including newspapers, magazines, and especially TV. For their part, it’s clear that the mass media sought only to profit from the incident by expanding readerships for the newspapers and magazines and increasing the ratings for the TV stations.

So, what exactly was this fixed view of the facade of the mountain villa that was broadcast every day for over a week? I think that it exhibits the characteristics of a *monument* much more strongly than those of a *document* (or documentary recording). None of the images succeeded in conveying any of the activity at the mountain villa. In the sense that they could not convey the true shape of the events supposedly unfolding inside the villa at all, it was impossible for the images to be documentary recordings of reality, or at least records good enough to give the sense of reality laid bare that is captured in images. The images became invested with something much more important than serving as documentary recordings. Each image came to bear an extremely symbolic property instead. The images were transformed into symbols signifying “the atrocious incident” committed by the “heinous criminals.” Or rather than the usual understanding of the word symbol, and partly due to the element of the images being broadcast live from *an immobile, fixed point of view*, these images sublimated into something truly *monumental*.

The following facts can be derived from this. First, there is the extraordinary fact that images effect manipulations that control the orientation of our consciousness as viewers, working directly on the unconscious level at first, then ultimately reaching each individual’s consciousness as they become capable of influencing even our morals. Second, there is the fact that images do not only derive their meanings from the realities they capture but

have changed into monumental objects of worship with single meanings that stand independently on their own. At this point, the “staged reality” described by Enzensberger goes well beyond its usual bounds by establishing another reality with a new self-determined meaning. The crucial thing is that this “staged reality” becomes possible only when both sender and receiver share in the tacit collective illusion that such images are never more than documentary records of what is actually occurring.

What the newspapers and magazines orchestrated with photographs and captions about the Asama Mountain Villa is the same as this example of the live television broadcast. I’m sure that readers can also recall constantly seeing the upward-facing photograph of the villa’s facade along with slightly different headlines and captions day after day. For more than a week the pictures did not show anything new at all. And yet we continued to gaze intently on those unchanging images of the mountain villa. What does this mean? Well, we cannot deny the fact that we watched with bated breath as though latched on to our televisions anticipating the conclusion of this drawn-out drama that had to come sooner or later. These static images did not fulfill their function in any way, however, if we limit ourselves to considering the function of images as we have come to believe in them: as the substitutions of something we can’t see with something we can. Instead, the denotational or display function of the image is lost in this moment, and a symbolic function has taken its place. What are these images symbols of? The meaning of the incident still cannot be properly grasped because it is still developing in real-time. Yet even so, television, newspapers, and the mass media as a whole, had already settled the meaning of the incident. The meaning positioned it as an exposure of the socially harmful and degenerate nature of a small splinter of extremist radicals as being the natural result of all the waves of rebellion that

erupted at the end of the 1960s. The expectation held by the state, the police, and the mass media in common was that the real situation would be sure to reach a conclusion in accordance with this meaning. Working backwards from there, we can see the images have been trotted out in a backward calculation. Accordingly, the power that these images had to evoke reality only related to a meta-level order of meaning. The key point was the entire inverted process that in the end effectively exposed the flow and meaning of the incident as a whole. The role performed by the spot news and the static images of the villa attached to it was to drag the viewer and reader along toward this conclusion. I think we can say this aim was thoroughly accomplished. The yearnings of the masses for the raw realities on the other side of the television screen certainly supported such an outcome. No longer the transparent screen through which reality was shown, the images had been transformed into the symbols and monuments of meanings to come. Mundane photographs of the mountain villa had been transformed into a monument made by enfolding the countless emotional attachments within each of us as viewers. Images are no longer windows that open to reality but become autonomous sacred idols unto themselves.

It is already well known that Walter Benjamin described how the invention of photography transformed the cult value that art held into an exhibition value by means of photography’s denotative function. However, some thirty years since he wrote this, the situation has already been reversed: exhibition value now appears to be invested with cult value all over again. Of course, what determines the value of each individual photograph is still what is in the photograph—that is, its exhibition and denotative functions. But these essential properties of photography have taken a form manifested socially, and I believe the form that appears in information society has become invested with cult value again. Just as

Enzensberger suggests, this shift is connected to the existence of the consciousness industry that manipulates each image, systematizes them within a single chain of meanings, and sends them out as reality. The consciousness industry tailors most information into commodities that can secure a profit and distributes them according to the consuming capacities of the masses. For who would want to by a commodity without any cult value?

What I am describing may be obvious, but for us photographers who have no choice but to work in the mass media, they are conditions that we cannot ignore. To run away from these conditions by only criticizing them and vainly touting a “moral victory” is just boasting of one’s own innocence. Still, what must we do in such a situation? This is the real question that confronts us today.

Part Two

Let me revisit *Provoke*. Although it might be too subjective, let me attempt to describe what we intended and what we did and did not achieve in publishing *Provoke*. *Provoke* did not have a clear awareness of being a movement. More than a unified vision as a movement, what sustained us was an extremely primitive impulse to do what could not be done by the photography and media dominant at the time. So there was not a critical awareness of specific problems shared among us. That was the main reason we ended the publication after only three issues. So, summarizing *Provoke* as a whole is something I am not capable of. At most, I can make a personal self-criticism of my activities in and around *Provoke* during the period I participated from 1968 to 1970.

What sustained us was the impulse to reject the photography dominant at the time and even more so now: photography that clings tightly to meaning, that starts from meaning and returns to meaning as the illustration of an existing

language [*kotoba*]. Images cannot be completely unrelated to language. Although actually, all that images do when they attach themselves to the level of language is occasionally provoke and amplify it. It would have been better to replace the journal’s subtitle, “provocative materials for thought,” with the phrase, “provocative materials for language.” What we shared was this rough degree of a direction. At the time, I was also asserting that photography is a documentary record. I wrote:

The fragments of reality cut out by a square frame are for me the unframed realities that emerge as the intense realities that I have lived through. I myself cannot understand how I became inextricably involved with such fragments. No, there aren’t clear answers anywhere to be found. I don’t understand even after publishing photographs or having one of my photographs printed and distributed widely. They were vividly real for me alone, living in that moment. A single photograph is incorporated into the history of my life, and taking up the camera anew, the opacity of my life as a whole weighs upon my finger on the shutter release. (“What Does it Mean to Be Contemporary?” 1970)

Looking back and reflecting on it now, my assertion that photography is a documentary record was the antithesis of theories that equate photography with the documentary. Such ideas strive to restrict the value of photography to its informational value alone as the transport of the distant to the near, the unseen to the seen, based on the material properties of the camera. This reductive notion has haunted all photographers in every conceivable way since the birth of photography. It is a watered-down naturalist realism, usually

amounting to what is the other side of the same coin, socialist realism. (Socialist realism documents only the dirty and the ugly as privileged archetypes of an era, obsessed with a conceited mission to denounce their time. In the sense that this way of thinking, this epistemology, harbors no doubts about existing language and meaning whatsoever, it is the same as naturalist realism. Only the corners they each take cover in are different.)

Against these notions of photography, I posed the idea of documentary records of the life I was living. Reality is not like saying a car is a car. Saying a car is a car is an obvious but unproductive truth. When someone looks at or touches a car, it becomes composed of distinctly varied realities within the entirety of the life that each individual bears with them. I believe that was the sole ground for my argument. That is, against the idea of a selfless objectivity that most of us immediately associate with the word documentary record, I argued the need to reassess the word from an attitude that stressed my ceaseless encounters with the world above all else. But in some sense, I may have ended up just dredging up a time-worn notion of subjectivity. Of course, I understood that the images a camera captures, as figures of a world that exceeds any preconceived ideas of the photographer, are part of a world that always exists beyond myself. Thus, I drew the conclusion that the individual photographs that remained were nothing other than traces of the life I had lived, in which I am the structure of a perpetual movement in which I went beyond the world just as the world mutually rejected me.

But can I so easily declare that photographs are really the traces of the life I have lived? This is the question I am asking myself again now. With the conclusion that these individual photographs were traces of the life I had lived I assumed that seeing was, if not the entire experience of life, at least the dominant part of it. But it is clear that our experience of life is

something far more holistic, something embodied. It would be much more appropriate to say that for the photographer, the individual photographs that remain are the alienated form of one's own life. Did I not wrongly trivialize the life I lived by making visible my lived experience in a single photograph and ultimately publishing it through the mass media? Most of the anonymous readers looked at my photographs just like they would a catalog photograph, devoid of the fullness of my life. What's more, there can be no mistake that within my assertion that photography is a documentary record, I subscribed to a belief that some form of communication emerges in the interval between the photographs and those who look at them, however indefinite it was. My stance was lacking any real recognition of the issues I am addressing in this essay: that personal expression is not possible in isolation from the social foundations that photography stands on, namely the mass media.

After having reduced my entire experience of lived life to the act of seeing, and then having published it through the mass media, what emerges is something doubly alienated with hardly a trace of myself in it at all. The circuits to and from myself have been torn to shreds. But to what extent exactly should a photographer take this on?

Looking back with a little equanimity now, what *Provoke* sought could be described as the acquisition of *parole*, or "speech," for photographers. It was meant as an attack of *parole* against photography's *langue*, or "language," one systematically ordered by existing aesthetics and values. To what degree it was successful or not is something that can only be judged by a third person, but I don't have any optimistic observations about the results of my efforts in *Provoke*. After all, the instant *Provoke* acquired its *parole*, it was completely swallowed up within a systematized way of seeing. So rather than succeeding in

some way, the one thing that was accomplished through *Provoke* was discovering of the impregnable multilayered structure of the present era. For instance, the technical aspects of taking photographs that were *rough* or *shaken* etc., (aspects that we believed, perhaps arrogantly, to be the products of direct encounters between the self and the world arising from our raw lived experiences), were immediately transformed into a design aesthetic instead. And so, the defiant stance that we may have had at the time, and the images that resulted, were liberally accepted as our dissenting emotions and feelings, completely undermining and pulling the teeth out of our defiance.

Back when the national railway's ridiculous yet lofty tourism campaign "Discover Japan," was being carried everywhere, a friend joked, "*Provoke* is getting huge, even the railways are using blurry images." It was no joke. Instead, the campaign evidenced how our efforts were undermined. The consciousness industry pulls the teeth out of everything and leaves behind only their hollow forms. Yet, this only captures half the picture. From the instant our photographs gained recognition, we ourselves began to corrode. The rough and shaky images that had been an outcome transformed into our "technique." There is no mistake this all began once the photography world made a clamor over whether *Provoke* was "contemporary photography or realism."⁵ I've digressed a bit, but I merely wanted to describe the problems we raised in *Provoke* and the limitations we encountered. As a photographer, I can only speak from the position of the person taking the photographs.

We tried to articulate a personal *parole* through the methods of photography, methods that had emerged and developed as a vital part of the emergence of the mass media. Although it may have been a logical contradiction, the possibilities for our endeavor-however little-were derived from the choice of the

format of the coterie magazine at the opposite pole of the mass media. Producing a small circulation coterie magazine based on photography was an attempt to restore the personal relations between individuals with photography, originally a technology of mass reproduction. It was a valuable experiment for us, but it was incapable of encompassing a wide field of view. Why? Because it was just a dream to think that we could start from that extremely small, liberated zone and expand outward in concentric circles, overturning all relations as we went. As is true for all liberated zones, like the one born in the May 1968 struggle in Paris' Latin Quarter, all that *Provoke* gained by temporarily establishing a free space was to cause the wholly un-free space surrounding it to manifest.

Contemporary mass media is bound unilaterally to the side of power. They manipulate and manage reality in order to change all of reality into information value, that is, commodities. They present only the reality that suits our tastes as reality. Because of this, rejecting the possibilities of the mass media and taking refuge in a "homemade logic" won't solve anything. Enzensberger wrote:

At the very beginning of the student revolt, during the Free Speech Movement at Berkeley, the computer was a favourite target for aggression. Interest in the Third World is not always free from motives based on antagonism towards civilization which has its source in conservative culture critique. During the May events in Paris the reversion to archaic forms of production was particularly characteristic. Instead of carrying out agitation among the workers in a modern offset press, the students printed their posters on the hand presses of the Ecole des Beaux Arts. The political slogans were hand-painted; stencils would certainly have made it

possible to produce them *en masse*, but it would have offended the creative imagination of the authors. The ability to make proper strategic use of the most advanced media was lacking. It was not the radio headquarters that were seized by the rebels, but the Odéon Theatre, steeped in tradition.⁶

We can understand the impulse to destroy the symbols of the productive power achieved by a specific era at the inception of the struggle against it, as was the case with the Luddites. By so doing, they create antagonism between themselves and their era and are able to obtain a kernel of autonomy. But if that is all, they could not bear a historical revolution in the true sense of the word.

Instead, we might consider how we can begin to encroach upon the mass media still in full force today. That is the concrete and immediate subject we have been given. I probably won't participate in a photography-based coterie magazine a second time because the self-satisfaction that results from it amounts to nothing more than an attempt to make a drastic escape from reality. Once I publish another photograph in the mass media, asserting it to be the documentary record of my own life, it will instantly be translated in a systematized visuality, far removed from the directness of my life. It would be too optimistic to deal with this by declaring that, as works of art, the photographs are out of our hands once we complete them and transform into separate living things, or by adopting the attitude that you will leave everything up to the chances of an uncertain form of communication. If I were to get really serious about photographs of my own life, then I would need to take responsibility for the form of such works too. It is after all impossible to have content without form.

The naive understanding that photography is a

documentary record of reality has now been cleverly appropriated by the mass media, and the mass illusion that photography captures all of reality is growing rampant. At the same time, within an upside-down world whereby anything that photography cannot record and anything that television cannot broadcast are seen as *not* real, I am forced to wrestle with the problem of what to do about this as a photographer. I will now return to this problem.

Part Three

During the nationwide general strike protest on February 10th, 1971, calling for the abolition of the US-Japan agreement on the handover of Okinawa, a police officer was killed. On the 16th a young man from Saitama was arrested as the suspected murderer. The sole "evidence" for his arrest were two photographs published in the morning edition of the *Yomiuri* newspaper, taken by a freelance photographer "at the site of the police officer's murder." In the six months since his arrest, he has remained imprisoned. These two photographs were given the caption, "police captain Yamagawa showered with blows and Molotov cocktails by surrounding extremists." The young man's face can be seen in the center of the photograph, but according to testimonies from people who were there at the time, he was in fact attempting to rescue Yamagawa from the flames. The two different explanations given to these two photographs produce meanings that differ by 180 degrees even though they are derived from the same photographs. I don't know which is accurate, but in my experience, no one participating in a demonstration would try to kick a policeman who was already on fire with the intent to finish them off. In any case, this is something that must be clarified by the actual trial.

The important thing here is the fact that the *Yomiuri* published these photographs labeled as the decisive moment of the crime, and at the

same time, the fact that prosecutors have total faith in these photographs as the sole “evidence” needed to make the arrest. While these are two different things, in the end they are intertwined by common interests. On the one hand, the newspapers publish the decisive moment they have captured as they seek to enlarge their profits through scandalmongering, while on the other, the authorities take the oppressive stance of mercilessly suppressing all those who oppose their power.

Although this has become a concretely political discussion, I have cited this episode here to challenge what seemed like an extremely symbolic description of the use of images in today’s information era. What is exposed here is a notion on the side of authorities that everything captured in an image is the truth, and the commodification of the documentary record by the mass media who themselves believe, and who want to make the masses believe, that images (as well as news stories) are the documentary records of everything actually happening. This notion makes the mass media’s manipulation of the situation possible and ultimately brings about their collusion with the authorities, putting the mass media in an unhappy love triangle with the masses, whose faith in the documentary record results in shoring up the stability of the authorities. I feel a strong sense of danger that these photographs torn from their surrounding context will induce people to believe they are the “crime scene” all-too-easily. A kind of self-hypnosis on a mass level emerges from the single event of a photograph being taken and published through the mass media. For the masses who are cut off from a dramatic reality every day, allotted only unskilled labor and scheduled segments of unskilled leisure, they come to believe that the dramatic always comes from the other side of the television’s cathode ray tube or the newspaper’s photographs. In addition, we immediately grasp that everything that appears on the television are dramatic

incidents of some kind. I can mention another personal experience to illustrate this fact. At the beginning of this year a friend of mine was suddenly arrested as a suspect in some incident. His arrest was covered on television, and his house was shown as it was being searched. Even though it was a house that I had often visited, it took on the appearance of a criminal’s house on the television screen. This self-hypnosis demonstrates a nearly astonishing power. Merely by being arrested as a suspect, and being broadcast as such, a single set of one-sided values and morals already become enforced.

At the beginning of this essay, I said the document had become a monument as the exhibition value of an image had been transformed again into cult value. To me these all emerge from the same thing. It all begins with the naive view of images: the belief that images are documentary records, and that everything that has been documented in fact occurred. Two uncritical attitudes result from these beliefs. First is the attitude of thinking that everything documented in an image is reality and that anything not documented is not reality. Second, and tightly connected with the first, is our uncritical attitude about the fact that it is the mass media who decides everything, that they choose whether or not to publish something that has been documented, how to compose a context for the fragmentary documents, and how to elicit threads of meaning. The masses, who only believe in what has been given to them, as mere receivers who have lost any critical attitude, have been transformed from the subjects of history to the bystanders of history. Because individual images are only “half-finished goods,” depending upon how they are combined, it is possible to transform their meanings. That is the first decisive characteristic of the image. For example, it is easy with some additions and some deletions to transform a Nazi propaganda film into an agitation film critical of fascism using the same film. The Yomiuri photographs

of the February 10th Okinawa incident are an extreme and primitive example of the malleability of images as well.

Based on the state of images that envelope us we can say that all documentary images that pass through the mass media have been manipulated, and it would therefore be more reasonable to declare them all illusions. What's more, because these illusions go beyond mere illusion to compose a new reality, many difficulties remain before us.

It does not necessarily stop with the concrete political manipulations that I have described here. If that were the case things might be surprisingly simple. We must stake everything on arming ourselves by exposing the manipulations of the mass media and developing counter-manipulations to confront it. Described in this way, perhaps I take these matters too lightly. Yet fundamentally, our tactical question has become how we should counterattack the enemy's attacks.

But the roots of the situation lie deeper. Our senses are commandeered on a deeper level every day. Just consider the issue of images and visibility alone. We are every day enveloped by innumerable images: sexual images of nudes and pinup photos, advertisement photographs, images of fashions, trends, and customs, as well as images of society not invested with any particular political hues. These are fed to us every day in the form of a single stereotyped point of view. What exactly is this point of view? With the repeated presentation of this systematized point of view, are we not increasingly able to only see the world in accordance with that perspective? While Andy Warhol claimed repetition is fame, we should not understand his quip as merely his playful sense of language. We should take it rather as an ironic yet critical use of language that strikes astutely at the mechanisms of information society by turning them against themselves. The political, just as Alain Jouffroy

says, is not just the confrontation between students and police, or presidents making speeches. It is something that has already begun when you catch sight of the retreating figure of the woman you love going past you in search of new curtains to move in with a new man. The political first emerges from the totality of everyday life, and then envelops the entirety of everyday life.

It is the boundless quotidian nature of the mass media that I believe gives it its true political role in the information society. The mass media systematizes the everyday for us and thereby systematizes and controls our sensibilities. Whatever opportunity for revolt that sex has is destroyed in the stereotyped view forced on us that keeps sex and commodities in their proper place. For instance, consider the nude photographs that fill the weekly magazines published week after week, or the sexualized commercials on television recently. They are for the most part equivalent. We look at these naked women as if we were looking at the catalog photographs of the newest sports car. Words like "sexy" regard sex in only "healthy" and "safe" ways. When we consider the issue of whether a nude photograph displays pubic hair or not, it is entirely a trivial matter. In pornography, yes, there is pubic hair. But if we understand it will never open a crack in the total body of society, in the end it is the same as the announcing the opening of the sweet fish (*ayu*) fishing season. Lifting the prohibition on pornography is a completely different matter than the liberation of sex. Even when photographs directly depicting sexual intercourse can be published in magazines, they will be allowed precisely because they have already been fully informed by a systematized point of view.

The myriad images that we experience are all manipulated images in the proper sense of the word. Even if we consider the nude photograph as a document of the woman who served as the model, it is unmistakably an illusion in the

sense of its manipulated and controlled point of view.

An illusion is unreal in the literal sense of the word; it is in no way reality. Or rather, an illusion has its political basis in averting our eyes away from reality. The state's and the mass media's manipulation of images continues to advance, expanding and intensifying, so that the phrase "the manipulability of images" can only be understood once we grasp its extent and depth.

Of course, journalistic photographs of every kind, such as recent photographs of America's bombing campaigns in North Vietnam, and the brutal photographs capturing the terrorist acts of Pakistan's military during Bangladesh's independence struggle are no exception. In each case, the images have been divested of their true significance and have been rearranged in a completely different context. We already know, to the point of being disgusted, the aggression and brutality of the American military in the Vietnam War through countless forms of information. Nevertheless, the fissure between our knowledge of these atrocities and our ability to bring them to an end is blatantly clear to anyone. Without question this is precisely where the mass media's manipulation of information comes into play at scale. Once framed as a Vietnam issue, or once the tragic figure of a girl harmed by industrial pollution is framed as a pollution issue, such images are immediately divorced from our reality by being bound up within the confines of these brackets. This is one more form of information manipulation.

The photographs that we photographers take and publish can never actually be free of the manipulations of the mass media. Further, most of the images we produce daily are first transformed into commodities in exchange for being taken up as raw materials for manipulation. The question is, is it possible to break free from the manipulations of mass

media or not? To continue to take and publish photographs without wrestling with this question for oneself is equivalent to openly aiding the other side. At least for those who consciously choose to be photographers or produce images, it should be the most fundamental issue to confront. Even now, the photographs we took are being incorporated into the reproduction of an illusion disguised as reality by the daily manipulations of the mass media. To give up photography, to give up being an image producer, would be a harsh way of life, one more like death. As we saw with the markedly political case of the reporting on the February 10th Okinawa protest, if one is unable to at least protect their own film with their own power and intelligence, then the very act of taking photographs will directly aid the authorities. This situation continues to clearly manifest itself today. The indefinite stance of the photography students and amateur photographers that flock together at demonstrations, allow them to become molded into a private photographic evidence squad for the authorities.

Enzensberger writes that in both capitalist and existing socialist countries there is no place where manipulation is not connected with power but speculates that in actual socialist regimes, the media would be able to fully exert its productive capacity. He describes it as what becomes possible with the self-organization of the masses through a social learning process that takes place when there is reciprocity between senders and receivers of media. As far as words go, he is exactly right. However, it is something that only becomes possible in a classless society that has undergone the true revolution to come. Thus, the schema described by Enzensberger has a slightly utopic ring to it. It is clear that many difficulties keep us from achieving such a revolution. But we cannot consider the mass media as an independent problem isolated from the dynamics of social revolution as a whole.

Frantz Fanon analyzed the changing significance of Algerian women's *haik* (a veil covering the face), the radio, and the French language for each stage of the Algerian revolution. I will only outline here what he said about the radio and the French language. In the first phase of the revolution, listening to the radio and to the French language, was to lend an ear to the entirety of the colonists and colonial authorities' values that were intertwined with the French language. To preserve their ethnic identity, Algerians rejected the radio and the French language, narrowly managing to defend themselves from being torn apart. In the second phase, since all information was controlled by the French government and colonists, it became necessary for Algerians to learn how their battles were going for themselves. Once they established broadcasts such as the *Free Radio Algeria*, the organization of their own language began. By the third stage, they started including French in their broadcasts to ensure the effectiveness of their communications. These developments precisely correspond with each stage in an armed revolutionary struggle. The important thing here is the process by which one set of values were sublated by a new set of values produced amid this reality.

"Looked upon as a transmission belt of the colonialist power, as a means in the hands of the occupier by which to maintain his strangle hold on the nation, the radio was frowned upon. Before 1954, switching on the radio meant giving asylum to the occupier's words; it meant allowing the colonizer's language to filter into the very heart of the house, the last of the supreme bastions of the national spirit."⁷ It was 1955 when the first non-French radio broadcasts began in Algeria. They encountered many French efforts to jam their signal. Often the broadcasts of *Free Radio Algeria* countered this by changing their frequency. There was no guarantee the entirety of a broadcast could be heard by the Algerian people, so listeners had to assemble whatever fragmented information

they could, and put together the true meaning of the information through group discussions. The descriptions of this process by Frantz Fanon are quite moving. The point is, we can only discuss the problems of the mass media and the path to their resolution as part of a concrete political process. The problems of the mass media deeply affect the political, from its apex in the narrowly defined notions of the political to the vast domain of the everyday which supports it.

To conclude, let me once again state the problem clearly. We are living under an illusion derived from the myth that the image is a documentary record. Because of this era's peculiar quality, an era in which everything is political, it is an extremely political illusion. We must start our work by bringing to light the workings of this myth within each of us in detail and rejecting the illusion. This includes the enlightenment work of clarifying our language of critique not only to describe the deception of the image and how the documentary is not a straight reflection of reality, but also what kinds of transformative potentials the sender has at their discretion. As we saw in the case of the Yomiuri newspaper's attempt to frame a student for the murder incident during the February 10th Okinawa general strike, the mass media's complicity demands a concrete counterattack from our side.

Moreover, we, the producers of images, have been given a most difficult task to endure: to live the contradiction as a contradiction. We must expose the manipulability of images carried out by the mass media by means of the mass media itself, and expose the socially established logic of images by using images themselves. We can already find attempts at this in pop artists' "re-signification of the sign." By disclosing the structure of images through images themselves, their attempts are clearly taking aim at the falsehood of the logic of images, such as Roy Lichtenstein's work which

magnifies the dots of printed images, and in the persistent repetition of the same image in Andy Warhol's *Marilyn Diptych*. Or, in the methods of what is called hyper realism that rapidly appeared on the scene the year before last, wherein the world is viewed as though it is a photograph, which, in depicting the subject from the perspective of the camera, displays how our own viewpoints are corrupted by being modeled on the point of view of the mass media. What's more, we find it in Jean-Luc Godard's attempts in films like *Wind from the East* and *Weekend*, in which images are not at all of reality. We see in the film what appears to be blood is shown to be only red ink, as well as in the nonstop discussions of the critical narrators in the film that describe images as fabrications that borrow the likeness of reality. We can easily recall the deliberately insider-

joke-like ruse of the people that often appear in Godard's films saying this is a film, not reality.

Our battlefield clearly spans two domains. First, there is the domain of the concretely political manipulations of information by the authorities, and secondly, the primary "home field" of the "consciousness industry" described by Enzensberger; the daily exploitation and manipulation of our consciousness and sensibilities deeply permeating our everyday lives. Our double front consists in discovering ways to increase our concrete counter attacks against these both. As both originate from our "interpersonal relationships," this cannot avoid becoming a political struggle.⁸

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Notes

¹ See, for instance, *For a New World to Come: Experiments in Japanese Art and Photography, 1968-1979*, edited by Yasufumi Nakamori (Houston: The Museum of Fine Arts, February 2015), and *Provoke: Between Protest and Performance—Photography in Japan 1960-1975*, edited by Diane Dufour and Matthew S. Witkovsky (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, 2016). Kelly Midori McCormick has compiled a more extensive bibliography of recent scholarship and exhibitions related to Nakahira for SF MOMA's digital publication, "[Focus on Japanese Photography](#)" available online.

² The "Discover Japan" advertising campaign featured blurred and shaken color photographs of fashionable young women in rural or rustic settings. Tomiko Yoda has discussed Nakahira's critique and the gendered modes of consumption enacted by the campaign in her essay, "Girlscape: The Marketing of Mediatic Ambience in Japan," in *Media Theory in Japan*, edited by Marc Steinberg and Alex Zahlten, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017).

³ See Yuriko Furuhashi, *Cinema of Actuality: Japanese Avant-garde Filmmaking in the Season of Image Politics*, (Durham : Duke University Press Books, 2013), the essay by Miryam Sas,

“The Culture Industries and Media Theory in Japan,” in *Media Theory in Japan*, edited by Marc Steinberg and Alexander Zahlten (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017), Franz Prichard, *Residual Futures: the Urban Ecologies of Literary and Visual Media of 1960s and 1970s Japan*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), and Ken Yoshida, *Avant-garde Art and Nondominant Thought in Postwar Japan: Image, Matter, Separation*, (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2021). Philip Charrier has also explored Nakahira’s critique of realism in the essay, “Nakahira Takuma’s ‘Why an Illustrated Botanical Dictionary?’ (1973) and the Quest for ‘True’ Photographic Realism in Post-War Japan.” *Japan Forum* (September 14, 2017).

⁴ Translator’s Note: Nakahira’s emphasis added in the original. Nakahira cites the Japanese translation by Nakano Kōji (1925-2004), published in the August 1971 issue of the journal *Bungei*. To capture the specific nuances of the Japanese translation that Nakahira draws upon, I have modified the original English translation: Hans Magnus Enzensberger, “Constituents of a theory of the media,” *The Consciousness Industry: On Literature, Politics and the Media*, (New York: Seabury press, Continuum Books, 1974), 125-126.

⁵ Translator’s Note: This phrase was the title of a roundtable discussion with Takanashi Yutaka, Nakahira, Kuwabara Kineo and others in *Asahi Camera*, April 1969.

⁶ Translator’s Note: English translation from Hans Magnus Enzensberger, “Constituents of a theory of the media,” 102-103.

⁷ Translator’s Note: English translation from Frantz Fanon, “This is the Voice of Algeria,” in *A Dying Colonialism* translated by Haakon Chevalier, (New York: Grove Press, 1967) 92.

⁸ Translator’s Note: This essay was originally published in the July 1972 issue of *Bijutsu Techō*, and later collected in *Naze shokubutsu zukan ka? Nakahira Takuma Eizō ronshū* (Tokyo: Shōbun-sha, 1973). This translation is based on the version that appears in the 1973 essay collection.