

The Photograph is a Question: Takano and Photographic Seeing

Essay for National Museum of Art Osaka,
Takano Ryudai: Daily Photographs 1999-2021

Duncan Wooldridge

A Changing Photography?

Can we propose a different, emerging conception of photography, an ontology which would understand the image not as recording the world as-it-is, but as informing, or constructing a world-in-the making? Can we conceive of, identify or recognize, an image that is unfixed, coming in to being, changing and transforming? Might we suggest, as the American photography historian Tina M. Campt has written in her book *Listening to Images*, that the photograph is not just a record of the world from positions of authority or objectivity, but the “that-which-will-have-had-to-happen” of a prospective or future image, a glimpse of the world which becomes concrete, which begins when the photograph is made?ⁱ Such an approach to photography would require radically different expectations and conclusions, but it is already in progress, in the work of artists who work with and explore the potentialities of photography. Such work is in progress in the practice of an artist like Ryudai Takano, whose approach to photography subtly reconfigures our conceptions of the image.

Our expectations of the photograph, and the language we use to describe our images, usually render photography as both transparent and fixed. In English, a photograph is ‘captured’ and its subjects ‘frozen’ or ‘arrested’; the image is an ‘index’ or direct trace, and the photograph a ‘window’ and sometimes a ‘mirror’, both of which propose a passing-through that suggest that our experience in the image is immediate, or rather ‘unmediated’. These qualities depend upon a subtle distancing of the image from processes of making: they separate the maker, or photographer, from the apparatus – the camera, and the technologies of the photographic – through which images are produced.

Experimentation within photography, especially in atmospheric or expressionistic images which draw attention to the detail and noise of the image, produce new styles without always managing to develop our fundamental assumptions about the image, leaving intact the 'photograph of', as an image to see been through, and the 'moment of', as a picture or artefact that is always retreating into history. By contrast, there is a line of enquiry and a proposition – from the photographic modernisms described by Laszlo Moholy-Nagy to Nobuo Ina, and the writings of contemporary historians and theorists including Vilém Flusser, Kaja Silverman, Ariella Azoulay, Tina M. Campt, and Yuk Hui, which suggest that the image is *in-forming*, moving beyond the static depiction and representation that is the commonplace use of photography, becoming anticipatory, speculative, and transformational. It is in this line that I think that Ryudai Takano's photography is best understood. Takano's photographic works display a continually evolving relation to both the camera and photography. His practice reconfigures how we use the camera to see.

Let us begin with the camera and its relation to the body. When we photograph to record or document, we claim that the camera is *present* and the human is *absent*. The camera is a machine which sees objectively, without us. Its mechanisms record, and its images are factual. Objective photographs are *uncropped* and exist without being *retouched* - this is the photograph as evidence and document. But then there is a sleight of hand: for when we photograph with creativity, to use photography expressively, we suggest that the human is *present*, and the camera *disappears*. The literature of photography abounds in writing about *The Photographer's Eye*, a description that forgets and downplays the cameraⁱⁱ. The canon of art photography contains many images that are the products of *vision*, *mastery* and *pre-visualization* where the camera is but a well-behaved tool. Yet both documentary and the expressive positions are convenient and reductive, for the truth is more complex: images are the product of a creative experiment between the photographer and the apparatus.

I will suggest that to photograph as an artist is to experiment: The artist conducts experiments in seeing, thinking and acting with the camera. To experiment is to go beyond vision alone, into realms that are philosophical, performative, social and political. The artist proposes a photography that might at times resemble familiar forms, and at other moments, construct new and unfamiliar visual languages: events, objects and experiences. To photograph experimentally is to be open to a multitude of possible forms. It is to necessarily invoke photographer and camera simultaneously. We should forget neither.

The camera is made to be carried, and relates to the size of the hand and the extensions of the fingertips. We produce photographs so regularly that the camera appears continuous with the hand and the brain's commands. If we pause for a moment, we can note something productive: the camera is different from the eye. This is its usefulness. Not only is a camera monocular, but it contains capacities to see at a distance, and to capture individual moments at a variety of speeds. It has many functions which are as yet underexplored. But for now, we can note the transformation of our capacities to see and remember: with the camera, we can see further, and with the photograph, access what Roland Barthes called the *that has been*, past events brought into the presentⁱⁱⁱ. The camera is an extension: it modifies, extending vision and transforming memory. This is what the media philosopher Bernard Stiegler describes as *technics*, which he notes changes our relationship to experience, and above all, our understanding of time.^{iv}

The Camera and the Body

Continually questioning how he photographs, Ryudai Takano's body of work is challenging. His work possesses no fixed style but crosses many territories of the image – from the recognisable image of the everyday, to a dismantling encounter with the body and its traces. His photographs encourage us to question the reality we see, and to extend our vision equally. Takano maintains a daily practice of producing photographs at the same time as constructing scenarios, events and installations. His projects might be viewed as a sequence of experiments, some apparently modest and accumulating over time, others intensely affective and impactful in the moment of their activation. Each are produced as explorations of what can be seen and known. His concerns are filtered through the photographic process, but touch upon key human experiences: he explores sexuality and the body, the city and our awareness of time. The act of photographing, for Takano, can propose ways of modifying our encounter with these subjects, which are so familiar that our accumulated experience can readily assume their continuity when they might be agents of change or transformation. Each work Takano makes contains a proposition about how we might use photography to subtly alter our vision and transform our relationships to the world.

Early in his career, Takano used his photographs to record and document bodies. The series *ca.ra.ma.ru* (1993-96) describes their intermingling: dark and theatrically-lit butoh dancers come together, bodies interacting and merging, melting and becoming indistinguishable from one

another. Takano's scenario here is quite clear: a camera is set up in a studio, and performers are invited, given space to perform with little choreography, examining free interaction. In their proximity, they begin a process of undoing the construct of identity by becoming figures with multiple limbs and shifting qualities – bodies that are at once muscular and skeletal, masculine and feminine. Bodies are caught in a contact that is continuously forming. There is an emergent image that is different from one moment to the next, registered by Takano's camera as singular frames, but always pointing to something uncaptured.

If we note the close movements of the body, do we register also the close contact of the photographer and apparatus, a mirror to the enmeshed figures? Takano is standing with his camera, its metallic body gripped by his hands, held close to the eye, arms compressed close to his chest. Body and camera are also nestled together. The camera is both inside and outside, visible and invisible: at one moment we assume it sees just as we see; at another, we use it as though it can act independent to our subjectivity. Takano's approach has been to observe the strange power of the camera, and to construct his images with photography's double function always in mind. *ca.ra.ma.ru* creates an ambiguity that the camera facilitates: an outside that is always already inside.

In 1998, Takano began to take and collect images every day as *Daily Snapshots*. He has said that “I started this series in order to make my act of photographing an everyday happening and try to regard a camera as part of my body.”^v The photograph, like the body, is enquiring, tentative and probing. In our everyday actions, we perform regular experiments, activating the senses, and constructing new encounters. A small group of *Daily Snapshots* are taken indoors, showing gestures of touch, and are a key to the project overall. Hands make contact: an arm reaches across to a hand holding a glass. One finger alights on the skin, whilst another burrows into the space between two digits. We recognize the gesture as affectionate, activating the receptors on the skin at the same time as a more assertive contact intertwines the two hands, binding them. In another image from the group, Red painted fingernails wrap themselves around cold metal; in another, a thumb feels the force of onrushing water; in one more, a little finger probes into the crevice of a plate of food suggestively. Each touch is a question. Each photograph is too. Takano, describing his *Daily Snapshots*, has remarked that “No one knows what a particular photo will mean in the future. I don't know either. It is not unusual that a photo that meant nothing at the time of the photographing begins to shine, all of a sudden, several years after”.^{vi}

If *ca.ra.ma.ru* and the Daily Snapshots hold the camera close, *Human Body 1/1* (1998-99), exists as an experiment in distance and remove. The work examines the photograph's objective qualities, its claim to be a trace and to record with immediacy. Takano began the project stating "I want to see plain reality"^{vii}, a reality that can be attained not solely through the presentation of the world as it appears to us (what we might call an anthropocentric naturalism), but the world as the camera also sees it. If a photograph is to figure the world accurately, we must note that the photographic negative is usually smaller than the object it represents. Photographs are condensed onto negatives or as files of data and are enlarged according to need, but this is a transformation that quickly becomes arbitrary, losing a claim to reality. Takano playfully uses the size of the negative as a measure or rule, a reality in itself. He photographs bodies and hands at 1:1 scale, abutting and overlaying the negatives to construct the image. Negatives then touch the surface of the paper, impress themselves with detail, in a material encounter that would confirm a photograph's quality as an indexical trace. Which is more real, a whole body in a photograph, or a photograph of a whole body that has kept its scale, built on contact and presence?

Takano's portraits are studies of complex bodies, attempts to sense and know through the act of photographing. Encounter is central to these images, something which the photographs not only record but bring about, the act of photographing being central to many of Takano's works in this area. The subjects of *In My Room*, invited to be photographed by the artist at home, are close by and also distant: their proximity registers in the closely cropped waist-level framing, frontality suggesting present-ness, whilst their posture retains the momentary caution of arriving in a stranger's home, evident in a subtle contrapposto-like turning both towards and away from the photographer and camera. Suspense is what Takano seeks out, his photographs making subtle reference to pictorial traditions, the visual languages of fashion and the editorial, natural posing and expectation or tension (his earlier *Reclining Woo-Man* photographs recall for example the reflexive Modernist nude). The effect of natural recording – of Juergen Teller's *Go Sees* on the photographer's doorstep, the unfettered immediacy of Nan Goldin, are escalated beyond staging or raw documentation, to become a complex interdependence. Beyond the compositional, towards gesture, there is mutual vulnerability: these photographs are an exchange, the sitter giving up their image to Takano, who grants access to his private space in return. The act of looking and photographing to encounter shows the continuation of an exploration of desire begun in *Tender Penis* and *How To Contact A Man*: where does desire start and stop? What blurs the line between the male and the female, identities and sexualities? Takano uses the camera not

to answer, but to enquire: the photograph renders ambiguous what we assume to be clear distinctions. It constructs for the viewer encounters that reveal more than our first assumptions.

Bodies and Cities

In his iconic study *Towards A Philosophy of Photography*, Vilém Flusser considers our uses of the photograph. In what he calls the *photographic universe*, he observes that photographs are made and quickly consumed. Most of our images are seen over seconds rather than minutes. Few photographs *inform* beyond initial impression, and Flusser meditates on the radical potential of a photograph that might surprise by being seen more than once, or with a slowed encounter:

“What would be informative, exceptional, exciting for us would be a standstill situation: to find the same news-papers on our breakfast tables every day or to see the same posters on city walls for months on end. That would surprise and shock us.”^{viii}

Flusser draws attention to our rapid looking: our ever-accelerating present is a craving for continuously new images, but this process becomes familiar in time also. Continuous change is sometimes a form of standstill. Our observations are hurried, as the media theorist Byung Chul-Han writes in an essay on the removal of mediation. He writes “if everything is made public at once, politics necessarily grows short of breath and becomes short-term; issues thin out into idle talk. Total transparency imposes a temporality on political communication that makes slow, long-term planning impossible. It becomes impossible to let things *ripen*.”^{ix} We need strategies – defamiliarising experiences, ambiguities and complexities – which open up avenues to pause, and look again.

The *Daily Snapshots* are a process. Takano’s decision to photograph every day is not to construct a record that resides in the past, nor is it an insatiable production that must be immediately broadcast. Takano’s daily process constitutes an *in-forming*, an approach to photography that acknowledges a gradual and emergent possibility at the centre of each image. Images do not stand still: they must be encountered and re-viewed, made familiar, and made strange, sequenced and re-ordered, and placed into new constellations to become strange once more. As Ariella Azoulay has written in her attempt to construct a new ontology of the photograph, we must understand the image not as something concluded at the moment of exposure, but as a continued encounter, which stitches together the act of photography with the experience of

viewer the photographic object.^x The *Daily Snapshots* permit revelations not only in how the world is represented (Takano often seeks not the spectacular but the very ordinary, including the cluttering of space and arrangement of forms, and also the shifting of perspective and time) but because the collection of images allow for the construction of new permutations at each moment of display. The photographs are a foundation to construct affinities and generate new interconnections. Takano encourages us to look across a collection of works in the series, drawing a thread, whilst sometimes he sets out each image as distinct, a surprising encounter. The photograph is multiple, plural: its meaning is collected across sequences and singularities.

We might further understand Takano's method by considering a parallel series, *Kasubaba*. These images, also of daily life, possess a similar proximity to the documentary style. The *Kasubaba* capture city scenes: a quantity of detail, the multiplicity of surfaces and sense of place. Their detail overwhelms and fills the image: poles, wires, railings and reflecting glass surfaces construct a dense layering of space. *Kasuba*, from *kasu* 'junk' and *ba* 'place' (*Kasubaba* is plural), are photographs that Takano has taken as images of encounters between the artist and the city. Avowedly anti-compositional, the product of competing interests and desires, the city has neither a singular unilateral direction, nor a collective sense of purpose. It gives little space, even to its icons and landmarks (a sequence of *Daily Snapshots* show the Tokyo Tower: over time, buildings grow around the tower, subtly beginning to cover it, wrapping or entombing). Takano's *Kasubaba* record the world, though this is a document on the city's terms: all-over, anti-compositional, and made against our aesthetic wishes. Why pause here? Why stop to photograph? It would be simple enough to say 'this is the world as it is'. Another answer is also possible: Takano's images may run counter to our aesthetic expectations, and willfully so – showing us the ugly reality over beautiful fiction or fantasy – but Takano has also chosen places where we pause. The *Kasuba* are everyday spaces – walkways, bus stops, and intersections: places where we observe, view, and plan our next moves. Drawing attention to these sites is to invoke our directional senses: 'which way?' and 'to where?' over the 'here we are'. Here we might suggest that Takano photographs not only to record the world, but to configure it also in a future tense.

In noting how we use the camera, Vilém Flusser reveals that our behaviours and strategies are often conventional: we use the image to point, and to construct images which resemble those which already exist. We need look only at the habits of our repeated subjects – iconic architectures, famous views, and yearly events, to note that many photographs perform pre-

determined functions. The camera is easy to use, but we rarely understand it, and we follow its many cues. Even when adopting a documentary language or approach, Ryudai Takano shows us an alternative, using the camera to see and to question, to look forward and to think. His photography enquires, and sets into motion. In *Towards A Philosophy of Photography*, Flusser suggests a radical division: there are camera *operators*, who use the camera for predetermined or programmed purposes; and there are *photographers*, who explore by testing and stretching the camera's functions, seeking possibilities and informative images.^{xi} Takano is certainly a *photographer*.

Bringing into Being

Because the camera extends the body and the image enables us to enquire; and because photography enables us to test ways of seeing and being, we might reconsider our technical images, to seek and generate new and subtle experiences that move beyond the world as it appears already. As we have seen, the photograph begins a process: it modifies our vision, allowing us to see through different eyes, and with different parameters and limits. Surely we should ask: what else might the photograph be capable of? how else might our awareness be informed? Can the photograph not only record and document, but bring in to being?

Around the time of The Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011, Takano's *Kasubaba* ended, and the artist began a turn towards thinking about matter and the intangible. As for many, the earthquake was a moment which prompted a reset, a need to refocus. A series of the artist's *Daily Snapshots* were produced in the aftermath of the quake in his Tokyo apartment: the city was still standing, but Takano's work was about to take a new direction. Boxes of Fuji and Kodak film lie strewn across the floor symbolically, and a solitary egg in the sink seems to have survived, a collapse and a pregnant pause. His study of bodies was continuing, but it had begun to take a direction towards new forms.

When the Absence of Light Touches The Ground, Distance is Lost and Distance Created (2010-) presents shadow figures. Bodies are seen on hard surfaces: stone and brickwork receive the impressions of passersby. Takano records not the corporeal body, but gives each shadow its own agency. He separates it from its origin, a trace detached from cause. It is a gesture that recalls and pays homage to Jiro Takamatsu's iconic *Shadow Paintings*, though Takano draws us to not to relations

of shadow and object – Takamatsu's concern is to fold together opposing dualities, presence and absence – but to the history of images, the passage of light, and deep time.

Let us consider the shadow, which returns us to the raw materials of the image: light and shade as well as heat, with which images are formed or impressed. From the first recorded observation of the camera obscura by Mo Di in China in the 5th Century BC, to the contemporaneous *Allegory of the Cave* by Plato in Greece, and the formalization of optics by Ibn Al-Haytham in Iraq and Egypt in the 10th Century AD, the image has long been with us. Light and shadows are interconnecting: their product is definition and the perception of space and time (and as a result, an awareness of continuous planetary motion). Images begin with light and shade, and a return to these properties is necessarily also a placing of the image in a bigger system and cycle of space and time. Shadows are what might sometimes be called proto-photographs: they record the passage of light and its stopping, the trajectory of particles and their interception in the body and in other translucent or opaque matter, without the need for optical devices or fixing surfaces.

The mathematician and astronomer Reza Tavakol has reminded us that photographs are in fact images of complex assemblages of time: each photograph records the passage of light from a variety of distances, received by one surface, the film plane or digital sensor of the camera.^{xii} Because we know that light travels at a constant speed, each particle of light on the surface of the image has travelled its own specific and knowable distance. What was seen at one distance took place at a different time to an object that stands at a different distance. A photograph is thus a collection of multiple temporalities. Takano's images of shadows attempt to extend this: residues and echoes from temporalities from outside of the frame. The shadow in the photograph is doubly refracted, the time of the image and the time of light passing by the body. Much more than its immediate appearance, we enter a deepening time. In shadows, something is lost and something is gained: this is a property of all photographs, and Takano's title alludes to distances collapsing and forming. His images of shadows may detach the body from its double, but they permit the opening up of an enlarged awareness of time.

Photo-graph (2012) sees Takano focusing upon what the phenomenologist Edmund Husserl would describe as *impression*: perceptual immediacy, and direct encounter.^{xiii} Images of softening shadows, and of spaces where nothing seems to be (a focus pulled to a shallow distance where space itself recorded, objects appearing only as distance residues): *Photo-graph* draws us to what can be seen, a *what* that is not the drawing of the image by means of light (the usual

interpretation of the word photography), but a drawing with and of light as subject. Takano shifts our focus towards the particulate and unstable, the ethereal and the entropic.

When the body returns, it is seen now in space: *Green Room Project* (2018) are installations of figures, where images – impressions made directly onto phosphorescent sheets – start to become tangible. Across corners, shadows co-exist and mix. They huddle and confer, step forward and are on the verge of action. In our growing post- and non-human conception of the world, the lingering impressions of the *Green Room Project* seem to speak to the future. What world will we construct? How will we act? The delicate observation of *Photo-graph* is the opening up to other forms of knowledge and intelligence, the *Green Room Project* a question of what we desire, and want, and are prepared to do.

Takano's photographic gestures turn the camera away from a long pictorial tradition – one which places the human squarely at the centre, and narrates an overarching narrative – and proposes a move towards gesture and action, encounters and experiments. Drawing together the body and matter, Ryudai Takano conducts an exploration of spaces and interrelations. Our body is a conduit to our experience in the world. The singularity of the body is a point of departure, one that is easily forgotten, misrepresented as destination or authority. From this body something begins and does not end: exploration, experience, dialogue, discourse, contact and transformation – a mixing, a becoming that is neither a fixing down or a confirming of the 'how it is'. A space beyond the singularity of the individual. Approaching the photograph as both a question and a bringing into being, Takano has produced a divergent and complex body of work. It is an oeuvre to encounter and contend with. He has shown that our relationship to photography can be generative, our relationship to bodies expansive. In doing so, he has gone beyond capture and document.

ⁱ Campt, T.M., 2017. *Listening to Images*; Duke University Press

ⁱⁱ The most well-known example is of course John Szarkowski's exhibition and book *The Photographer's Eye* (Szarkowski, 1966. *The Photographer's Eye*; Museum of Modern Art), though it is the wide-ranging industry of books and regularity by which photographers are praised for having *a good eye* that I am referring to mainly here.

ⁱⁱⁱ Barthes, R., 1993. *Camera Lucida*. Vintage Classics)

^{iv} Stiegler, B., 1998. *Technics and Time 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*; Stanford University Press.

^v Takano, R., 2008. *Takano Ryudai Reflects on Contemporary Japanese Photography*. 19th May, 2008. Stanford University.

^{vi} *ibid.*

^{vii} *ibid.*

^{viii} Flusser, V., 1983. *Towards A Philosophy of Photography*; Reaktion, p63.

^{ix} Han, B-C., 2017. *In The Swarm: Digital Prospects*; MIT Press. p.17

^x Azoulay, A., 2012. *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography*; Verso

^{xi} Flusser, V., 1983. *Towards A Philosophy of Photography*; Reaktion

^{xii} Tavakol, R., *The Time(s) of the Photographed*. *Philosophy of Photography*, Volume 10, Number 2, October 2019, pp. 195-206 (12)

^{xiii} Husserl, E., 2019. *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness*. Indiana University Press.

Husserl identifies impression as the central perceptual experience of present-ness. Photographs usually function as forms of memory recollection, which Husserl would describe as retention, and which Stiegler after Husserl, calls *Tertiary Retention*, a technically assisted memory. We might venture that Takano instead is asking interesting questions about a technical or *Tertiary Impression*.