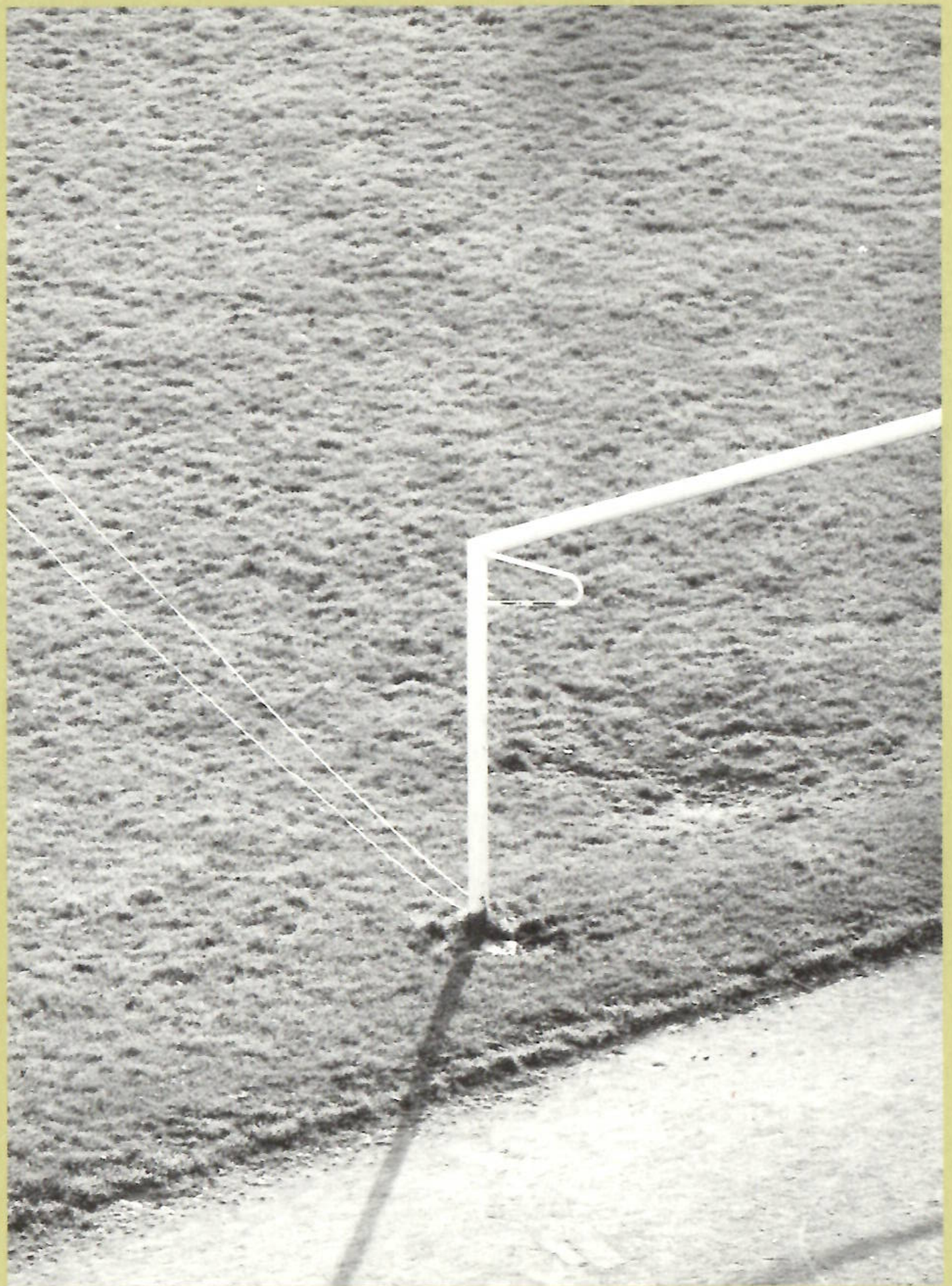


# Tomiyasu Hayahisa

## Une ligne formée de points





## Restricted View

Across a series of eight photographs by Tomiyasu Hayahisa, a caged rhinoceros traces a lonely, well-trodden path which resembles either the number 8 or the symbol for infinity. Tomiyasu's works themselves seem to trace a similar pattern to this animal, yoked as they are to a concept that severely restricts their range of expression. By calling the rhinoceros series  $\infty$ , Tomiyasu wryly points to the possibility of a certain kind of openness within this confinement. Does his work bear this out at all? Or do his concepts leave his photographs spinning in circles?

To begin, let's acknowledge that many of Tomiyasu's series appear to function according to strict rules. For example, in *TTP*, each photograph shows a ping-pong table in a Leipzig park that Tomiyasu used to see from a window of his apartment. All of the photographs are shot in color, using portrait orientation, and they all share the exact same angle of vision, looking down at the ping-pong table. This table is the main subject of the work, always framed so that the blue railing that runs around it is visible. In *FBT*, Tomiyasu's photographs are in monochrome, but the idea is similar: without fail, each photograph shows one corner of the frame of a football goal, always shot from the same perspective, alternating only between the left and right corner. Hearing the series explained in this way, it almost beggars belief that anything remotely interesting could result from them. What, actually, is the point of taking hundreds of photographs of an anonymous ping-pong table in a public park? Why limit your view to such banal objects? Why, in the end, subject yourself to such rules, when the whole world is there to be photographed? All fair questions. And yet, even though Tomiyasu's photographs appear to subjugate themselves to a tyrannical restriction, I'm convinced that they *do*, in the end, exceed their conceptual parameters.

It will help to trace brief history of the « concept » in relation to photography. Conceptual art emerged during the 1960s, when the early work of Marcel Duchamp started to take on its second life as the paradigm-defining work that it is today. In Duchamp's wake, artists used their work to question

1. Sol LeWitt, «Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,» *Artforum*, vol. 5, n° 10, June 1967, p. 80.

notions like style, artistic genius, and art historical affiliation, all of which had determined the value of art up until then. If their goal was to criticize or reveal the structure of art, the work that they made could not simply continue on old forms. But the material fact of having to actually produce a *thing* was a challenge. In his well-known essay from 1967 called «Paragraphs on Conceptual Art», Sol LeWitt offered one solution: «The idea becomes a machine that makes the art».<sup>1</sup> The hand of the artist, in other words, is nowhere to be found in production.

Consider On Kawara's work. In «I Got Up», he used a mechanical stamp to mark the time that he woke up each day on a postcard, which he then mailed to someone he knew. He repeated this process – every single day – between 1968 and 1979. Kawara's famous «Date Paintings», in which he painted the date of that particular day, do not speak to anything remotely like his artistic skill. They simply record the date that he painted them, in white on a monochrome background. They offer little for the viewer to appreciate in terms of, say, the way that he applied paint to the canvas. «I Got Up», «Date Paintings»: these works can be called the direct and almost accidental result of a linguistic idea expressed in their titles, with as little involvement of the artist as possible.

2. LeWitt, again: «To work with a plan that is pre-set is one way of avoiding subjectivity». Joshua Shannon clearly outlines the pitfalls of leaning on photography to avoid subjectivity in his essay «Uninteresting Pictures. Photography and Fact at the End of the 1960s», which is collected in *Light Years: Conceptual Art and the Photograph, 1964-1977*, Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 2011, p. 89-97 (ed. by Matthew S. Witkovsky).

So, why did photography enter this scene of conceptual art? In short, it was a very good way for artists to resolve the problem of what to make. For all the succinct beauty of LeWitt's statement that the «idea becomes a machine that makes the art,» it is just a figure of speech. Strictly speaking, ideas are not machines, and *something* had to actually get made. Enter photography, with its (not always fulfilled) promise of un-subjective, un-artistic recording that still resulted in an image that could circulate as art.<sup>2</sup> Photography was a convenient machine for giving concepts form. This is why Ed Ruscha's early photobooks of American gas stations and parking lots function as conceptual art: they have nothing to do with Ruscha's relative aesthetic skill at rendering these scenes, and everything to do with his own repetitive gesture of pointing to them and asking the viewer see them as art. When Bernd and Hilla Becher photographed industrial buildings, they did so with extreme precision, framing them all in the same maddeningly precise way. And yet, their obvious technical skill was no demonstration of artistic genius. Instead, it served a purpose quite similar to Ruscha's. The strictness of the Becher's gaze was a tool to wrench these buildings from their immediate context, and (in the lineage of the Duchampian readymade) present them as art – their first major body of work to exhibit these buildings was called «Anonymous Sculptures».

Let's return to Tomiyasu's work. Are his ping-pong table and soccer goal also «anonymous sculptures»? Has he set himself the same kind of austere rules that governed Kawara's work?

On the one hand, Tomiyasu's major series are taken from a fixed-point perspective. Still, I am hesitant to group them too quickly with the kind of strict conceptualism that I have been describing, because strangely, by restricting his view, he allows the world in.

This is why, for all that his photographs partake of a restricted view, they do exceed their parameters. Looking at *TTP*, for example, we learn that a ping-pong table can be used as a chair, a sofa, a breakdancing floor, a dog grooming station, a date spot, or a stretching aid. It is a place for sunbathing, stargazing, lounging, napping, hiding, picnicking, ballet dancing, meditating, yoga, frisbee, or archery. (Anything, it seems, but playing ping-pong.)

Tomiyasu's camera *does* move; his is not a rigidly fixed perspective, or a militant kind of centering, as with the Bechers. He is not recording the ping-pong table or the football goal as a machinic way to test out an idea. Instead, these objects catch the myriad forms of human life that pass through, over, under and around them. More often than not, he presents the table as a gathering point, a quite literal support for meetings of pairs, trios, and even large groups of people. For all that these photographs could be called conceptual – they do follow an underlying idea – they lack the cool remove of the conceptualists. Tomiyasu's choices about when to click the shutter, how to subtly frame the scene, and what to include in the final edit speak to his unabiding interest in sociality, emotion, and play. The titular fox that runs across the images of *Fuchs* breaks any sense of disembodied gazing – it casually reveals that the ping-pong table and the goal are sitting just a stone's throw away.<sup>3</sup>

3. In a text that he wrote for the book version of *TTP*, Tomiyasu wrote that this fox was the genesis for the project: «I have frequently been at my window waiting for the fox, but it never appeared again. Slowly but surely I started to observe the ping pong table». Tomiyasu Hayahisa, *TTP*: London, MACK, 2018, n.p.

And although I have associated the word «conceptual» with a certain remove from the world, that isn't entirely a fair description of it, either. Even On Kawara's date paintings, for all of their mechanical recording, include a source of absolute contingency that breaks up their otherwise complete subordination to the arbitrary yet inexorable forward march of numerical time: many of these paintings were placed in a box that included a newspaper clipping from that same day.

Something similar happens in *ongoing*, Tomiyasu's new slide show in which numbers count up from 1 to 434. Each number flashes up on screen as an element of a snapshot photograph that is projected for one second. To be sure, this work has a conceptual rigidity in line with Kawara, or Ruscha: its immediate meaning lies in the repeated gesture of finding independently meaningless numbers, in Tomiyasu giving himself over to their unending advance, and in letting the entirely arbitrary length of the work determine its title. The quite precise centering of each number might even recall the Bechers. Now, it is *our* gaze that is restricted, as viewing the work largely becomes the experience of keeping one's eyes glued to the center of the frame, where the next number is



to appear. And yet, this work cannot be reduced to a simple exercise in counting. Sometimes the number appears on the back of a football jersey, sometimes as a haphazard scribble on pavement, sometimes in an advertising photograph. There's no rhyme or reason here: the only stable fact is that they will keep counting up. These wildly differing images come flying in, a new one each second, without reprieve. Tomiyasu allows the absolute contingency of the world to punch out moments of openness within his restrictions. Even if these moments can't actually reach infinity, perhaps letting them in was the point of the concept all along.

Cet ouvrage accompagne l'exposition *Une ligne formée de points* de Tomiyasu Hayahisa qui se tient à L'Imagerie – centre d'art du 05 novembre 2022 au 14 janvier 2023.

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