

Yoshio Nakajima

Out of the Picture

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Yoshia Nakajima

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Even as a young man, the Japanese artist Yoshio Nakajima (* 1940) followed his urge for freedom, finding new avenues of personal expression in his performances and deliberately disrupting the everyday life of society. Starting in Japan, this was to take him to various European cities, on whose art scenes he had a considerable influence. The title of the exhibition, *Out of the Picture*, describes, on the one hand, how Nakajima's art burst open the traditional concept of the picture. On the other hand, it also reflects the fact that his influence on art has until now been overlooked, and that he has been left 'out of the picture' as far as art history is concerned. This exhibition puts him back on the scene, chronologically tracing the places where he has lived during the course of his life.

Japan 1957–1964

Yoshio Nakajima was born in 1940, in what is today Fukaya (Saitama prefecture), about 70km from Tokyo. His family have lived there as farmers for over 300 years. His parents urged him either to become a monk or to support his poverty-ridden family. He, however, had other plans: at the age of 14, he left his home village and moved to Tokyo in order to become an artist. He earned money by working in a factory and eventually managed to go to night school. One night, on his way home, he shocked passers-by at an underground station by jumping in front of an approaching train (*Moving Object Train Station*, 1957). He knew exactly where the train usually stopped, and so was never in any serious danger. For onlookers, however, it was a shocking scene and a violent disruption of the commuters' everyday routine. From then on, Nakajima decided, he would carry out an action in public space each day, with the aim of stirring up people's regular everyday lives and sharpening their dulled senses. One of his actions, for instance, was to paint

a strip of paper several metres long on the floor of an underground train in amongst the passengers (*Action Painting in Train*, 1958/59). In 1959 Nakajima enrolled at the Musashino Art University, but was bored by the tuition and left after just a few days. His art did not follow any academic rules; instead, he sought to use his own body in direct, spontaneous and impulsive expression—he enjoyed the freedom of art. Nakajima moved in the sphere of young Tokyo art movements that were inspired by Dadaism. These called for the removal of meaning and refused unambiguous interpretations of their performances, which were apparently nonsensical. In 1959 Nakajima began to carry out actions with colleagues from night school. In 1961 the group eventually called themselves *Unbeat*, performing regularly under this name. At that time in Japan, an artist group such as theirs—focused purely on individual expression and rejecting any form of hierarchy—was unique.

Netherlands 1964–1965

Yoshio Nakajima had already met the painter and graphic artist Daan van Golden in Tokyo. Van Golden encouraged him to study art in Rotterdam and offered him his studio in Schiedam. At the beginning of 1964, Nakajima decided to take up van Golden's invitation and set off to hitchhike his way to the Netherlands. During the seven months of his journey he earned a little money by selling sketches and singing traditional Japanese songs. In the Netherlands Nakajima moved in the circles of the emerging Provo movement, who at that time were staging provocations aimed at challenging the establishment. He had contact with the anti-smoking activist, preacher and pseudo-shaman Robert Jasper Grootveld, who performed exorcisms in the city centre of Amsterdam at which he sought to drive away the spirit of consumption. Nakajima, who spoke little English and no Dutch, was seen within the Provo movement as exotic, while his performances were initially thought by the press to be Japanese rituals. Grootveld set up a 'Magical Circle'

around the central Spui square in Amsterdam, where there is a statue (*Het Lieverdje*) sponsored by a cigarette company. In 1965 he invited Nakajima to 'hold a religious service' there. A journalist later described his performance as a thrilling dance with a striptease routine. After just ten minutes, Nakajima was arrested by the police in front of the audience. While he was in the Netherlands, Nakajima also collaborated with Thom Jaspers: in a series of performances in Gouda (*Crash Happening*, 1965), advertised by Jaspers as a religious service for the daily victims of road accidents, Nakajima appeared as *Unbeat*, but was soon arrested. In the same year, during a performance at Galerie Honger in Schiedam, Nakajima attacked a car wreck half-naked, pouring red liquid over it—here too the police eventually intervened. After about a year's stay in the Netherlands, Nakajima was in the end expelled from the country for staging 13 unauthorised events in public space.

Belgium 1965

Nakajima's next destination was Belgium: in 1965 he moved to Antwerp and enrolled at its art academy. In the summer of 1965, he, Wout Vercammen and Hugo Heyrmann staged the first Happening in Belgium on the Groenplaats in Antwerp. A month later, the three artists and Panamarenko—today one of Belgium's most famous artists—organised a second event in Ostend, to which they gave the meaningless title *KYRPWWAWAX. Happening in a brave new city IV*. In a photograph of the performance we see Panamarenko, who is standing on tiny red chairs in futuristic dress reciting a text with a megaphone, while Nakajima is lying on the floor, fiddling with a wind instrument. Together with Panamarenko, Hugo Heyrman and Wout Vercammen, Nakajima set up the art magazine *Happening News*. Here they worked with collages of images and texts taken from newspapers and academic journals. A total of six issues were printed, although Nakajima was only able to work on two of these. Because of his

performances, he came into conflict with the police in Belgium too, and was expelled from the country after just a few months.

Sweden since 1966

Following his stay in Belgium, Nakajima originally wanted to move to the USA. However, upon the advice of Asger Jorn, co-founder of the *International Situationist*, in 1966 he instead moved to Sweden, where he still lives today. He was the first foreign student to enrol at the Valand Academy at the University of Gothenburg. In 1967, he made his studio into the *Landala Modern Art Gallery* and organised exhibitions and performances there. He at first lived with Jorn's brother Jørgen Nash and his artist commune in Drakabygget in the south of Sweden. Nakajima became part of the movement of *Bauhaus Situationists*, founded by Nash following disagreements with the *International Situationist*: its belief was that the consumption- and event-oriented society led to the dulling of the senses and loss of creativity, and so they made the case against

the commercialisation of art and for the potential of an active, creative life. They wished to liberate people from the passivity of consumption and called for artistic actions, which they saw as the free expression of an active community. It was in his performances in Sweden that Nakajima no longer saw the spectators as a passive audience but instead invited them to actively participate.

Overground Movement 1968–1969

In 1968, the year of student revolts, Nakajima travelled with artist friends from Sweden to various 'hotspots' of the protest movement. They appeared with a banner as the *Overground Movement* at prominent sites in Paris, Amsterdam, Copenhagen, Brussels, Antwerp, Paris, Kassel and Venice. They formulated the name Overground in order to distinguish themselves from the art 'underground': although Nakajima declared himself against the mainstream and commercialisation, he did not want to remain hidden underground, but preferred to be active on the surface.

In Paris he performed with a gas mask in front of the Museum of Modern Art. In Venice he was one of the students who protested against the commercialisation and nationalisation of art by boycotting the *Biennale* international art exhibition. Finally, in 1969, he travelled to the Soviet Union and provocatively showed pornographic images in public by pinning them to his clothes or sticking them on his face.

Germany 1971–1972

Although Yoshio Nakajima has never lived in Germany, he has—via the *Bauhaus Situationists*—had contact with several artist colleagues, who have regularly invited him to Germany. So it was that in 1971 he attended several large festivals there. At the *First International Street Theater Festival* in Braunschweig, the 'Japanese artist from Sweden' attracted a lot of attention—including that of the press. In the same year, he took part in the *Kunstzone München*. After Hermann Nitsch's action there was stopped by the police, Nakajima stepped in to fill the

gap. He was interested in the art of the Viennese Actionists, and met both Nitsch and also Otto Muehl at the Undependent Film Center. He was also familiar with Günter Brus' actions: a poster for Brus' last action, the *Endurance Test*, hung in his studio.

In 1972, within the context of *documenta 5* in Kassel, Nakajima performed *Psi Mandala* for his artist friend Yukata Matsuzawa. During the same year, he had his first solo exhibition in Tokyo. His performance at the Satou gallery in Tokyo shows that the Viennese Actionists had made a lasting impression on him. During the 1960s, he had enriched performance art in Europe by introducing Japanese elements; now he passed on European aesthetic strategies to Japan.