

## **Of Parrots and the Poetry of Urban Life**

Hayahisa Tomiyasu in conversation with Gabrielle Schaad

## **Gabrielle Schaad**

Having had the opportunity to encounter your work on various occasions over the past years, I have noticed that there seem to be two threads running through it: on the one hand I would say it is about recording urban situations – images, that is, which draw on the built-up surroundings of city life. On the other hand, and this is actually a subcategory of this city life: the world of animals. The question “what is urban photography?” seems to have resulted in a systematic method for you. Although your lens uses the city as a background, it recognizes constant aspects, which by virtue of how they change from location to location, hour to hour, day to day, become narrative topics. Would you care to comment on this approach of yours?

## **Hayahisa Tomiyasu**

It's true that when contemplating my various projects here in Rome I realized I was interested in discovering the “character” of this city. What I am saying here is that I am not interested in observing the city or its urbanity directly, but rather in finding something that has yet to be defined – you might call it the “grey zone” of a city. This is how I have come to start out by tracking down situations that catch my attention, but without immediately realizing what they mean for the city. Then I begin observing or seeing or thinking about what this or that situation contains in terms of knowledge about the city. Often the objects I have discovered – or what you call “constant” things – don't even “mean” anything at all. That is exactly why I am interested in them: They make me want to find out why they exist in the first place and how I can make them visible by virtue of my experience and resources.

## GS

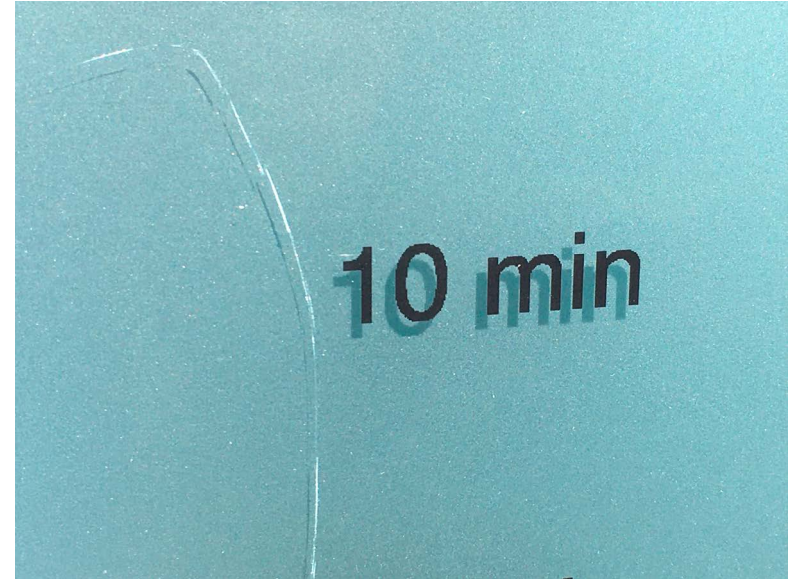
One might say that you are on the lookout for the specific “collective subconscious” side of a city, which you then proceed to uncover by virtue of photography (even if these photographs of yours are not analogue). But I would nevertheless like to know how you move around the city. There are different approaches to be found in the history of “city wandering”, for example the *dérive* (the “psychogeographical” exploration of a city by means of aimless rambling) at the Situationist International, the *flâneur* in the metropolises of the 19th century as described by Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin; or the constructed environment as well as the strollers deconstructing seemingly untouched nature in Annemarie and Lucius Burckhardt’s works. However your work clearly deviates from all of these approaches.

## HT

You’re right, I do things differently. Back when I had just moved to Germany, I was not aware of these approaches. I would tend to draw on my daily routes and routines. Later on in Zurich, for example, I started taking pictures every morning on my way to work, on my way to the Zurich University of the Arts, that is. After a while I was struck by a particular building right near Altstetten Station, and I started photographing it from the vantage point of Hardbrücke Bridge. This way of working was not really a “new method”, though. I was just trying to cautiously approach a situation that I could observe over an extended period, as I had already done in Leipzig. But ultimately I found that documenting the scenic transformation of this initial object was not enough of a challenge. Then covid-19 hit. I was caught in a sort of holding pattern, since I could not yet be certain whether I would return to Japan or whether I wanted to aim at another stopover in Europe. During the lockdown in Zurich I began to go out in order to collect numerals in public spaces. I focused on this alone. This numerals project made me realize that I wanted to apply a similar approach in another city at some point. And I did indeed manage to create a second iteration of 10’ here in Rome. What I enjoyed most about this was that as I collected numerals in public spaces, the city felt like a playground. This focus helped me approach the city and experience it from a different perspective. As I collect numerals, I happen on objects or situations which I would have otherwise overlooked, and as a result, the next day, or the following week, I feel the urge to contemplate them more thoroughly. This is how these walks work, as do my observations and my work in practice.



Storen, 2018-2020, Video, 15 :19



10" (Zürich), 2020, Video, 10:00



10" (Rom), 2021, Video, 10:00



## GS

Your previous work was not shaped by the automatic reflex of your camera only, there was also the “automatic” aspect of your daily routines. But how to you go about collecting numerals? Are they, too, somewhere on a specific path from A to B? I also find it remarkable that you use these Arabic numerals almost as if they were a cross-cultural language, whereas there is a clear difference between Latin and pictographic language and script.

## HT

Again, my approach to this project is systematic. First I look for a street (depending on the circumstances I may use a map) that is very long, so that I can assume it contains a great deal of “information”. I always decide on a street first, then go there and follow it conscientiously. First I take pictures of the numerals on one side of the street – and on my way back of those on the other side. Zurich is comparatively small, but here in Rome it is easy to lose one’s sense of direction and get lost. Since I had trouble finding my way at first, I chose my streets starting from the Istituto Svizzero di Roma on a city map and walked down these as far as they went. As soon as I returned, I marked my daily route on my map. Thus, slowly but surely, I began to move away from the institution our into the city. However, based on the numerals collected in Zurich I already knew more or less how many pictures I would need, ultimately, if I wanted to produce a juxtaposition in the context of a double projection.

## GS

More often than not, the highly conceptual aspects of your work are reflected not only in the way you go about it but also in how you present it. You always make sure that form and content produce a coherent unit, but not without introducing little disruptions or stumbling blocks. In your juxtaposition of two “countdowns” of collected numerals from urban spaces in Zurich and Rome you deliberately aim at achieving comparability based on differences. Every few minutes we recognize similarities in the juxtaposed image compositions or situations, but it is precisely their comparability that emphasizes the differences between them.

Some time ago I published a comment on your chosen format, a countdown recurring every 10 seconds in novel combinations of images, saying that your work over the past year has practically become a symbol of how we experience time during – or hope for the end of – the corona crisis. The 10-minute sequence of images is as short as it is long. Although the repetitive countdown is quite monotonous, new and varied situations surface with every sequence of numerals. Since no image is projected for longer than one second we never succeed in perceiving everything that is on it. This contributes to holding our attention as observers. While the gesture of a countdown is always inherently exciting, repeating it for 10 minutes ultimately drains that excitement.

## HT

Controlling how long, how many seconds or minutes that is, an image is shown, is something I have always been interested in. When I exhibit prints on a wall I have no control over the time span during which they are perceived. The first time I showed my work using a slide projector I realized that it is indeed possible to control the statement made by an image by means of the time span during which it is shown. Ever since, I had been turning this thought over in my mind. When I finally had the idea for my numerals project, I immediately knew: each image would only be projected for one second. This is even shorter than the amount of time usually allowed for the projection of a slide. I once read somewhere that on average, exhibition visitors look at a painting or photograph in a museum for only six seconds. At first I found this thought depressing. – Just think of all the effort that goes into the creation of an image. The path to getting an image on a wall is usually affected by many decisions, and it can be very time-consuming. Moving image formats may hold viewers’ attention for longer because videos work differently and/or contain more information.

What I am interested in doing with the repeated countdown is making viewers aware of the passing interval of 10 seconds as such, but differently, based on 10 images. Naturally the variety of information in the background behind the images and around the numerals varies in density. This made me a little nervous at first, since the succession of images is extremely rapid. But soon I noticed that there comes a moment at which one gives up on trying to follow every single image; instead, one feels the rhythm of time flowing and delves deeper, differently/in another way.

**GS**

So what you are saying is that this work is ultimately about subjective perception of time?

**HT**

As a viewer one feels the flow of time together with other viewers, as if one were meditating together, you might say.

## GS

A rare experience, actually, since our perception of time is usually linked to how individuals perceive themselves in a given situation: when we feel comfortable in a situation time passes quickly, but it can also feel like it is dragging. It is amusing that this subjective but also divided perception of time has often been a topic of discussion among friends and acquaintances since the beginning of the corona crisis: for example the feeling that individual days feel infinitely long, but weeks (too) short. This brings to mind your new image sequence 12:00. In it we see photographs of clocks in public spaces, most of them above billboards, and these are pictures taken in Rome. In the end you selected 12 photographs and arranged them as a block, 3 x 4. Does the title refer to hours, or minutes or maybe even 12 seconds?

## HT

The title 12:00 means 12 noon. Here in Rome a daily ritual takes place on the Gianicolo Hill. Ever since 1847, a cannon shot is fired there at precisely 12 noon. Once upon a time the Vatican wished to make sure that all churches in Rome knew exactly when it was 12 noon, allowing them to synchronize the tolling of their bells. This cannon salvo has long become obsolete. But the daily routine became a ritual, and it has been maintained. On my walks, as I took pictures of numerals along the streets I had selected, I noticed how many clocks in the public space were actually not showing the correct time. I liked this contradiction very much. A daily cannon shot prescribes a unified temporality, and yet so many clocks display the wrong time. Once, just as the cannon salvo resounded, I happened to be standing in front of a clock that was behind and began to take pictures of these slow or overly “hasty” clocks, always at 12 noon. Hence the title: I would have liked to choose an Italian one, mezzogiorno (mid-day), but that is a term which also has geographical connotations.



The cannon firing atop the Gianicolo hill takes place daily at 12:00.



12:00, 2021, 12 images, size variable



## GS

What you are doing here is staging a shift, one that has always been inherent in the medium of photography by virtue of its indexicality on the one hand and the popularity of ascribing meaning via subtitles or captions on the other hand. What we see, as opposed to what in fact is, may diverge substantially and the two are re-confronted in your work. You show us something similar in Palo, although it does not refer to the theme of time or perception thereof: there we see city views of Rome – at least at first! As our eyes become accustomed to your work, a questioning gaze recognizes graffiti, parked cars, street corners. What are the pictures about this time, one wonders, what is Tomiyasu drawing our attention to? To be honest it took me a moment before I noticed, that in fact – and the title actually tells us this – it is the poles, most in them in a state of disrepair, lining the streets of this public space. The line-up is such that we suddenly no longer perceive the object as an anomaly, but rather as constant element which restructures the image. Our perception shifts as when confronted with a picture puzzle. Our attention is increasingly drawn to the poles. And yet they are a formal element, devoid of meaning, which, almost like a hair falling on a negative, suddenly acquires a significance it did not have before.

## HT

There is a little story connected to this work. When I arrived here in September, I saw the broken road-sign pole lying next to the entrance of the Istituto Svizzero (and by the way it is still there, half a year later). It immediately became one of my images of Rome, since I had never seen anything like it in Zurich or in Japan, where the pole would no doubt have been removed within a few days. As I was collecting numerals I noticed that there were innumerable “sign-less” poles like this to be found in Rome’s public spaces. Initially I listed them as part of an “inventory” without giving much thought to the matter. It was only later that I realized that most are leaning poles, which no longer display a road sign and thus “populate” public space but have no meaning whatsoever. They indicate nothing. They have forfeited their erect “posture” and their function. It is precisely as a constant anomaly that they are all the more conspicuous. I was not interested in simply collecting these poles, but rather in seeing the city from their vantage point. In order to achieve this, I straightened the leaning poles in my images, resulting in a slanting city horizon on the photograph.

## GS

The angle at which these poles lean, which is then transferred to the city, did indeed bother me at first, since they look as if they had been straightened or repaired. The exception and the rule, the deviation and the constant exchange places.

## HT

What I find thought-provoking is the observation that these sign-less, leaning poles are (still) allowed to remain standing in Rome – in Zurich or in Japan they would have been straightened or repaired immediately. This means there is an in-between space for objects of this kind, one that is not subject to strict control – I like this idea very much, since it somehow makes for a more relaxed atmosphere overall. Last autumn I began to learn Italian. Little by little I am managing to say what I would like to have at restaurants, or supermarkets. But I still have trouble understanding the answers. – When this happens I tilt my head to the right or the left in order to show that I haven't understood. This gesture is exactly the same as when I tilt my head in order to see the city from the angle of a leaning pole. Here both gestures come together: one shows that I am no longer able to understand what is being communicated in Italian and the other is an attempt to observe the cityscape from the vantage point of a leaning pole.





The broken pole of a road sign next to the entrance of the ISR.



Palo, 2020-2021, series, size variable



## GS

I would rather not lapse into stereotypes, but perhaps one could say that in Switzerland there is a marked awareness of functionality. For instance, it is a country with a significant design and graphic arts tradition, and apparently in this respect – despite innumerable differences - there is a similar affinity in Japanese culture. Perhaps there is in fact a relative parallel in this appreciation of objects which appear to be perfect in their most reduced, ready-to-use form. With this in mind I also see your interest, even though it is expressed in a formally reduced form itself, as an undermining of such functionality traditions. These remnants, liberated from their purpose, coexist in daily life in the urban space that is Rome. Hence your observations are not emphasizing an object fetish. Rather your “portraits” ascribe a narrative quality to these poles, individually and as a collective. Each pole, in the surroundings of its neighborhood, is a contextual contemporary witness, so to speak, witnessing what happens there, on a daily basis or over the years. Your pictures suggest that the erratic poles can tell the story of their neighborhood. To each one we attribute its own character, based on repetition and difference, especially because these poles have forfeited their function of spatial organization.

## HT

It is only because I began to collect numerals that I noticed this feature of bearing witness. Otherwise I might have noticed the poles, but I doubt I would have wanted to create portraits of them.

## GS

So in a way you trick yourself with a task or “obligation” to look for numerals, in order to be able to redirect your attention. However, apparently some lucky finds which have often proved useful for your work, you might call them “serendipity moments”, seem to have regularly been linked to animals: as with Papagallo. You once had a fateful encounter with a fox in front of a ping-pong table, another with a rhinoceros in a zoo, as well as with little gnats around a streetlamp or migratory birds on a telephone wire. So how did your encounter with the parrots in Rome come about this time?

## HT

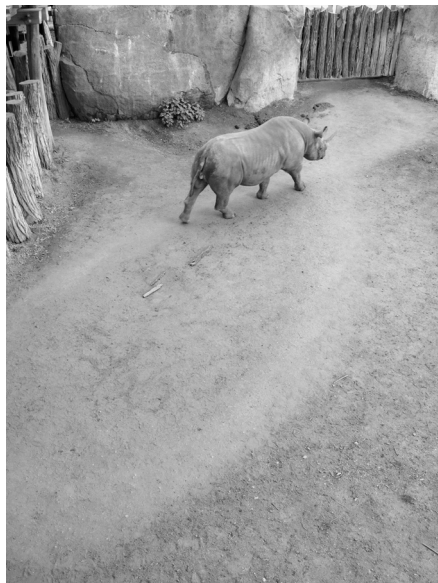
Right from the start I knew that I wanted to observe something from the window of my room again during my residency in Rome. Over the years it has almost become a habit for me to focus on my surroundings by virtue of the “finder” that is my window. Of course I can never know what the window frame will disclose to me, if indeed it does. This went for Rome as well. When I arrived here and moved into my fifth floor atelier, several parrots suddenly flew by my window. I knew that the same type of bird can be sighted regularly in Tokyo as well. I did some research and found out that not only do these birds live in Rome and Tokyo, but also in Amsterdam, Paris and in Germany. Their history is the same everywhere: in the 1970’s and 80’s, parrots were imported from Western Africa or Southern India as live tourist souvenirs. Some were released, some flew away and their new surroundings became their new habitat. Normally it is dangerous for native animals when a new species spreads like this and newly imported animals are not particularly popular. Not so with parrots. The public perception of them is appreciative, they are felt to be colorful messengers of an atmosphere reminiscent of summer. What I find interesting about their history is that these birds arrived as immigrants and have now found a home here. I myself will only be staying for ten months and have come from abroad. As different as the starting points in our lives may be, perhaps this is actually why I began to build a relationship to the parrots. I started taking pictures of them, perched on the roof I can see from my window. I admit I can’t say if these were always the same birds. I can try to analyze them based on their beaks or some other distinctive feature, but there is almost no chance of identifying them. And yes, you’re right, looking



Fuchs, 2011, 36×24cm, 13 images, pigment print

## HT

back I would say that my encounter with these parrots was a stroke of luck. But these lucky finds don't always reveal themselves immediately. First I need to find a way of dealing with the initial situation.



∞, 2018, 8 images, 22.5×17cm, pigment print on reispaper





NA T 250 LR, 2016-2017, 85×65cm, series, pigment print



Linie, 2010, 52×39cm, 3 images, pigment print



Pappagalli, 2020-2021, series, size variable



**GS**

In your series you portray this bird, once an immigrant and now a local, as diverse and multifaceted, like the owner of a domestic animal concentrating on this pet as a kind a companion. And yet in some of the pictures you have captured a moment or an angle resulting in powerful abstraction, so that the animal is a mere graphic, aesthetic trace in the image we see. In the selection you showed me, a gradual process of convergence takes place. At first, the observer can hardly make out what he/she is looking at: a ledge is immediately discernible, but it is only gradually that the protagonists become recognizable. Just as we have no sense of scale at first and might even think this could be a picture of an insect. You seem to be portraying the birds playfully, tongue in cheek. Have you finished studying these parrots or do you plan to go on working on this project until you move out of your apartment and leave behind your window here at the Istituto Svizzero and move on?

**HT**

My observations from my window always depend heavily on where I happen to be. As soon as external circumstances put an end to my stay, my work is concluded as well. So I will continue working with birds here until the end of June.



## **GS**

Are the humorous aspects of your photographic aesthetics something you can control with hindsight via a selection from the images produced or do you have an approach prior to or during photography which may “provoke” a stroke of luck, or at least help capture it?

## **HT**

The images shown here are a provisional selection, in which composition is a fairly dominant aspect. In each image, we see the ledge in the bottom and the sky in the top half. Perhaps this is an element of composition I can start from, since from this perspective the birds under the roof are closer to me. This is an aspect I thought about the other day.

**GS**

For your numerals project and your work with the out-of-sync clocks, you devised a corresponding presentation format. What format do you have in mind for this voyeuristic documentation of birds under or on a roof?

**HT**

It's too early to say what sort of format this project will lead to, whether it will be a book or an exhibition only. However, I always tend to exhibit individual works or series first, not the other way around. This allows me to see how they look in an exhibition space and better judge whether a book format would ultimately make sense.

## GS

You attended the Leipzig Academy of Fine Arts & Institute of Book Design (HGB). As the name says, it is an institution which advertises its focus on bookmaking. Is spatial distribution of your work prior to producing a book a need that became apparent as early as during your student days?

## HT

There is a venerable tradition of art and photography books in Leipzig, but the same is true of Japan. Nevertheless, when I start a project I never try to emulate a specific publication. Although I am a bookworm, there are very few conventional formats that would make me want to create my own photo book in the same vein. Personally, to me it is always fundamental to clarify whether there is a need to make a project out of a book. This is one of the lessons I learned at the HGB in Leipzig. I have produced several series which might do well indeed as a book – but is a book format really necessary? Exhibitions, on the other hand, really are necessary, since we take photographs in order to show them. But this initially takes place in a spatial context and not in the fixed or printed form of a publication. Although the book format is always tempting – I try to not to get carried away. I prefer to produce fewer books, ones which I am likely to be truly pleased with in the long run.

## GS

Digital photography has created new opportunities in terms of the measurements of prints and/or their installation. What is your approach?  
What are your points of reference in this spatial installation process?

## HT

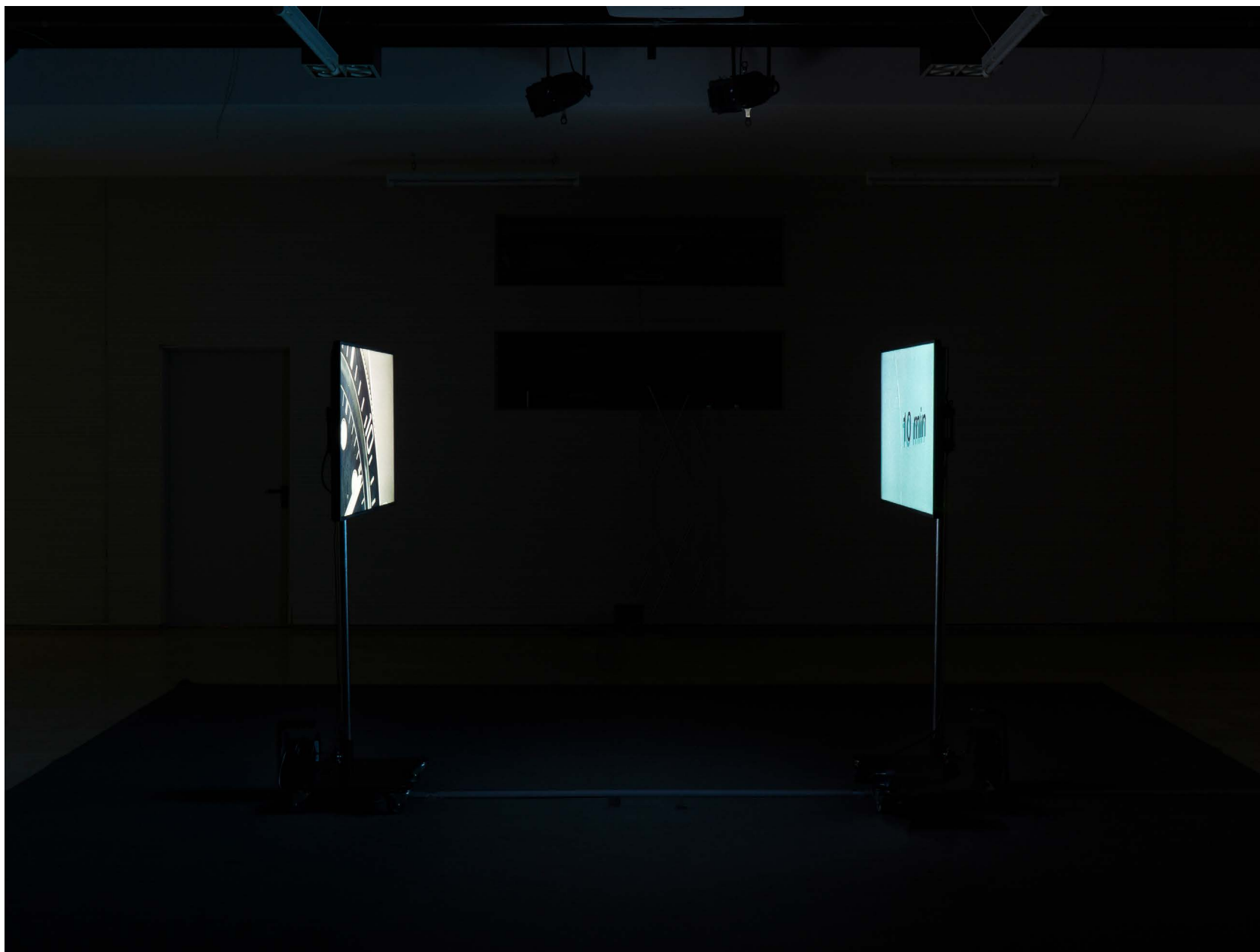
What I like about photography is that photographs can be printed on paper of various sizes. In this respect, photography is very flexible. I am not obliged to decide on the size of the final result when I start out. Making a sculpture is entirely different. Papagallo will be shown here in my atelier. It is not a particularly large space, but I can adjust the work to fit. I will present the parrot prints by laying them out on a table in front of said window. The clock project will be shown on a wall facing the Gianicolo hill, where the cannon shot is fired every day at noon. For the poles I will choose a smaller format, so that only the cityscapes are perceived at first glance and the fact that these poles are actually the main focus of my work doesn't become apparent until one takes a closer look. However, if I were to show this work again in a larger space, I would reserve the right to adapt the formats accordingly.

## **GS**

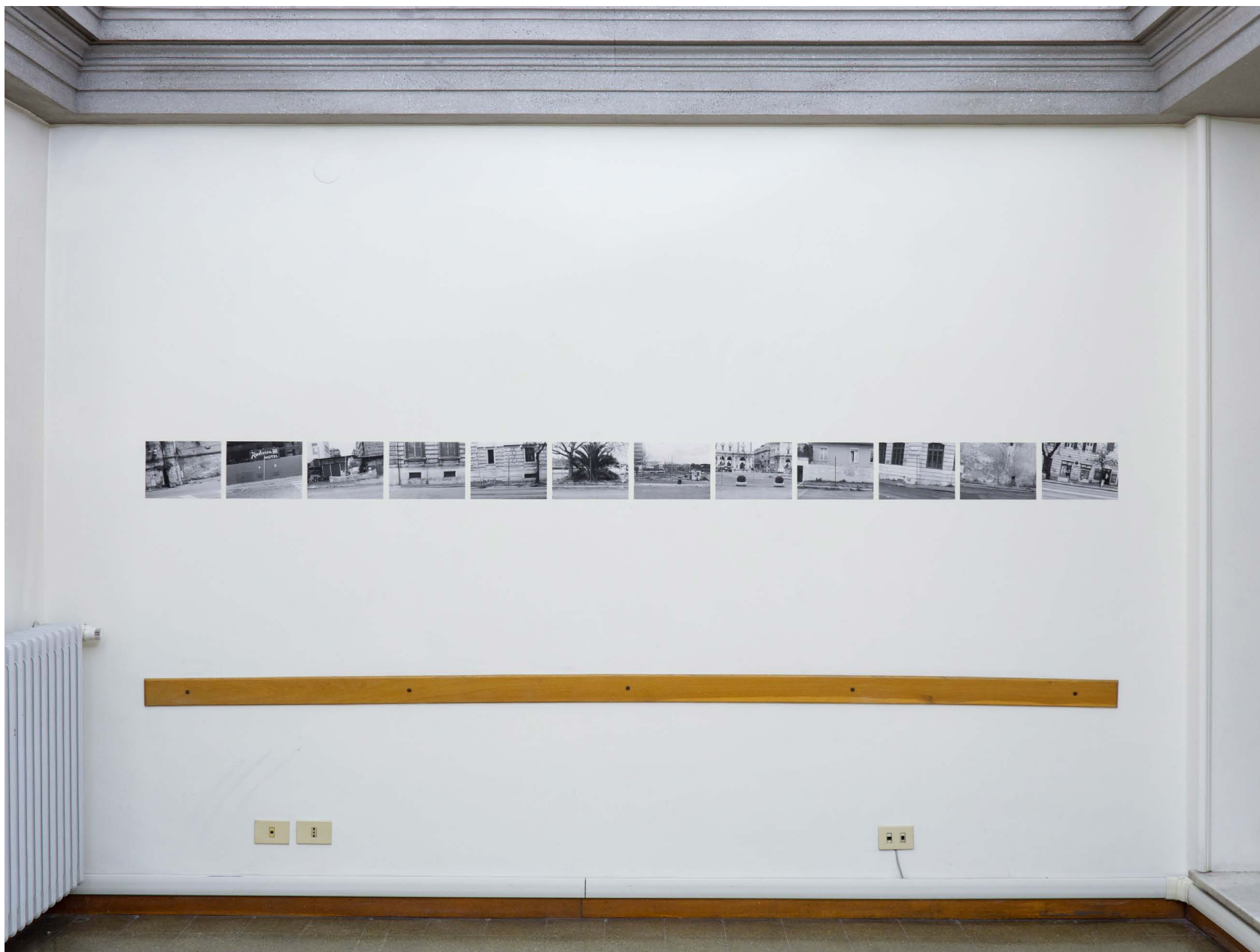
So this will be a presentation that is very specific to its venue, bringing the space outside into your workshop and living space and corresponding with it at the same time.

## **HT**

Adapting my work to an exhibition space always requires a great deal of energy. In this case, though, the setting is particularly important to me, since one of the protagonists of my stay here in Rome was my atelier; the room I spent the most time in.



10", installation view, 2021, ISR



Palo, installation view, 2021, ISR





12:00, installation view, 2021, ISR



Pappagalli, installation view, 2021, ISR

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Transcription: Benedikt Bock

Redaction: Gabrielle Schaad

Image: Hayahisa Tomiyasu

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