Performing the Power of the Photography

*BeHere/1942* by Masaki Fujihata

**Abstract**

The aim of this article is to analyze the art and research project *BeHere/1942* (2022) by the Japanese media artist Masaki Fujihata. The collectively created intermedia system, which enables viewer participation, refers to a forgotten series of propaganda photographs documenting the internment of West-Coast Americans of Japanese descent in the Little Tokyo district of Los Angeles. *BeHere/1942* employs creative strategies developed by Fujihata, who is an acclaimed pioneer of the use of augmented reality technology in media art. The project also constitutes a daring form of critique of the dominant media narrative about the historical event. The article examines the forms of experience in which the creators of *BeHere/1942* enmesh...
the viewers. Particular attention is paid to interactivity, a new understanding of historical photography, and the act of photographing as a performance of power.

Keywords
Masaki Fujihata, *BeHere/1942*, augmented reality art, Japan–United States relations, photography and performance

Abstrakt
Performowanie władzy fotografii: *BeHere/1942* Masakiego Fujihaty
Celem tekstu jest analiza projektu artystyczno-badawczego *BeHere/1942* (2022), koncepcji japońskiego artysty sztuki mediów Masakiego Fujihaty. Stworzony kolektywnie intermedialny system, w którym widz może uczestniczyć, odwołuje się do zapomnianego cyklu fotografii propagandowych dokumentujących internowanie Amerykanów pochodzenia japońskiego z zachodniego wybrzeża Stanów Zjednoczonych na terenie dzielnicy Little Tokyo w Los Angeles. *BeHere/1942* opiera się na różnych strategiach twórczych uznanego pioniera wykorzystywania technologii rozszerzonej rzeczywistości w sztuce mediów. Jest również brawurową formą krytyki dominującej narracji medialnej na temat wydarzenia historycznego. W tekście analizowane są formy doświadczenia, w jakie wiklą uczestników twórcy *BeHere/1942*. Zwraca się tu szczególną uwagę na kwestie interaktywności, nowego rozumienia fotografii historycznej oraz aktu fotografowania jako performansu władzy.

Słowa kluczowe
Masaki Fujihata, *BeHere/1942*, sztuka rzeczywistości rozszerzonej, relacje japońsko-amerykańskie, fotografia a performans
BeHere/1942 is an art and research project that sheds light on a historical event often overlooked in Europe—“the forced relocation” and imprisonment of “the interned” Japanese Americans living on the West Coast of the USA during World War II. The project, directed by renowned augmented reality artist Masaki Fujihata, invites participants to explore critical gaps in the media narratives surrounding this mass imprisonment, particularly about the experiences of those interned in the largest city of Southern California, Los Angeles. In this article, I will discuss: the user experience, the role of documentary photography in media systems, and the power of the act of photographing. Before delving into these topics, I will provide an overview: the goals of the project, selected historical contexts, the exhibition’s structure, and Fujihata’s media art strategies. Explaining these foundational elements is crucial to understanding the multiple layers of the artistic system.

BeHere/1942 is an ambitious project that aims to enable participation in a past historical event in a possibly materialized manner. However, it is very different from historical reenactments that rely on performers, weapons, costumes, and choreography to recreate battles or specific moments from the past. Instead, BeHere/1942 utilizes a set of correlated media technologies that are not a substitute or a “time machine” but a system that allows us to experience past events from the perspective of a contemporary cultural participant.

BeHere/1942 focuses on the “forced relocation” that took place in May 1942, creating the ghetto of Japanese Americans that lived in Los Angeles and of all the West Coast of the United States. Around 120,000 Japanese Americans were forcibly transported by bus and train to “relocation centers” and imprisoned for years until the end of the war. However, BeHere/1942’s goal is not only to recall this dark part of the USA’s history. Instead, it offers participants new ways of engaging with historical events that occurred eighty years ago.

Before entering the BeHere/1942 exhibition space, visitors pass through rooms of the Japanese American National Museum (JANM). The museum’s collections introduce the history of Japanese Americans and Japan–United States relations in the twentieth century. The JANM provides the opportunity for exhibition

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1 See Rebecca Schneider, Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment (London: Routledge, 2011).

participants to learn about various contexts and documents relating to the conflicts between Japan and the United States, including well-known events (such as the attack on Pearl Harbor, fighting in the Pacific during World War II, the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the subsequent surrender and occupation of Japan), and partially forgotten episodes including, among others, daily life in relocation camps.

The JANM collection also highlights later decisions regarding US historical policy, for example, Ronald Reagan’s document on reparations for Japanese American citizens who were imprisoned in the 1940s. George Bush’s diplomatic team in the early 1990s repeated similar gestures when the issue of imprisoning Japanese Americans returned to public debate—during the fiftieth anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor. Overall, the JANM collection presents the transformations of the relationships between Japan and the United States, not as a straightforward matter, but as a set of cases requiring the efforts and influence of the Japanese and Japanese Americans.

The sources gathered by the JANM let the viewer consider the path of the social identity of Japanese Americans. The “relocation camps” are a part of it that BeHere/1942 is deeply concerned with. Memorials relating to the events of their imprisonment have only recently come under protection. Fujihata’s exhibition developed this research work in its way. The forced relocation and imprisonment of Japanese Americans during World War II are discussed in several educational activities in the USA.³ The exhibition BeHere/1942 utilizes augmented reality technology in a more immersive, nuanced, and thoughtful way, while artifacts from the JANM collection provide historical context and highlight the issue of ethnic discrimination in American history. In general BeHere/1942 encourages its audience to think critically about the past.

The JANM’s location is also crucial for the exhibition in a more general sense. Many discriminatory practices against Japanese Americans originated in California, where the infamous anti-Japanese movement was widespread. This discrimination had a systemic dimension and found support in federal law in the halting of further migration from Japan to the US and the prohibition of Japanese immigrants from acquiring agricultural land. Despite these circumstances, newcomers established institutions, fought for their rights through the courts, and established an ethnic community on the West Coast. When relations between the two countries became strained, the increased surveillance

of potential hostile forces intensified. Suspected leaders of the community were monitored and detained as potentially dangerous. It is worth noting that events of the fateful year of 1942 were not only the consequence of “war hysteria” but were based on over fifty years of anti-Japanese practices in the region.4

The historical events documented by the famous American photographers Dorothea Lange and Russell Lee form the visual and narrative base of the project. However, the exhibition extrapolates and contextualizes the photos as part of the project’s media system. The visual aspects of BeHere/1942 come mainly from the photographs available in the online archives of the Congress Library and materials in the National Archives. Fujihata, as a multimedia artist, was intrigued by these photos. He emphasizes the exceptional skills of the photographers and the specific media context, particularly the digitized versions based on the negatives. The artist, as he confesses, intended to present the 1942 photographs in the way he thinks Lange and Lee wanted them to be made public, without outside interference such as framing and captions by US government specialists. The images, 3D models, and animations created by the project team are digital interventions into the negatives by famous American photographers. These frame the people waiting for forced transportation: families with children, people laden with luggage, hurrying, waiting, and looking for each other in the crowd. The creators of BeHere/1942 present visual materials about this event in four different forms.

In the first room, visitors can observe selected photographs printed in high magnification. One of them captured the mirror reflection of the photographer instructing a young girl to pose that was visible in her eyes. Fujihata was intrigued by this. We don’t know why the photographers are visible in the mirror of the eyes. However, the artist believes that, through this strategy, Lange and Lee intentionally reveal the staging. According to the Japanese artist, the photographers aimed to make the act of photography visible to the viewer.

The second room presents an analytical approach to the gaze, framing, and shooting. It aimed to uncover the gaps in the narratives that emerged from comparing the photographs of Lange and Lee. The contemporary creators construct narration by juxtaposing selected photos from the original series with official documents, letters, and notes. Through these contextual materials, visitors can understand better the individuals featured in the photographs: their names, surnames, ages, and sometimes the specific moment in their lives when the event took place. Additionally, the research involved a few now-elderly internees,

children when imprisoned, who shared their personal experiences and their life stories. Overall, the sources in this room work together to offer a more intimate and human perspective on the events of eighty years ago.

In the next room, Fujihata’s exhibition invites visitors to explore the act of photography itself. Through augmented reality technologies, he considers blurring and modular forms of being inside and outside the frame of the images. The exhibition provides replica cameras used by cinematographers in the early 1940s for visitors to wear around their necks. The installation room is minimalistic, with only three vertical screens. Once participants put on the camera replicas and activate the devices, they can see on the screens what the lens is pointed at—co-participants in the exhibition and a virtual space reconstructed from one of the train stations on the day of the relocation. Active participants can take photos in the hybrid space by pushing a button. These photos show not only the exhibition room and other visitors but also the computer-generated space where the protagonists of the events were waiting. By doing so, participants take on the ambiguous role of the photographers and reflect on the process of creating the photos that inspired the exhibition.
The last part of the *BeHere/1942* exhibition is an interactive AR walk through the plaza in front of the JANM building in downtown Little Tokyo. It is the most advanced and impressive part of the exhibition. The AR experience is possible through the app available for iOS, downloadable from the App Store to your device. Alternatively, the participants can rent one of the museum’s iPads during the exhibition. The app works better on larger displays, and the developers recommend using them. For artistic purposes, some functionalities of the app work only in the plaza, the full version is only available at the exhibition site, where we can interact with all 3D models, objects, and situations. Outside the JANM site, we can interact only with one random model—to generate it anywhere.

When the user points the device’s lens on the plaza, a full-scale interactive environment appears on the screen, a staged event created during volumetric capture sessions with actors. The computer animation portrays people crowded in the square, an oncoming bus, American uniformed officers, families with children, young and old, and photographers. Interactive animations appear in dedicated physical locations in real space. When the user is closer to one of the figures, it starts moving—we can see the scene on our screen. The user can spend time walking around the square with an iPad in hand, exploring the hybrid space and discovering more animations or viewing them from different perspectives. The visual experience is nonlinear—it depends on the user’s curiosity, consciousness, and will.

Unlike in more common AR apps, based on game or play mechanisms of capturing attention, in *BeHere/1942*, the users are in constant contact with the outside world and the present. Therefore, it is essential to partly “stay in the real” because of the pedestrians strolling through the square. The overlap of several spheres of representation can cause temporary cognitive confusion. It is easy to walk across the models. When this happens, users can feel the unusualness of the situation—because the expected tactile stimulus and reaction did not occur. A similar experience has been the subject of Fujihata’s experiments over the years. However, in the case of *BeHere/1942*, it could be conceptually connected with the sudden disappearance of the community from the public space in 1942.

All four forms of digital transformations of the Lange and Lee photographs raise several questions: Why do the images about the traumatic experience of imprisonment appear in the daily press with no excuse? Why do the photos present smiling mothers with their children? Why did the visual propaganda narration (describing the situations as “relocating dangerous community in a humanitarian

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way”) win in the 1940s? One answer to this is that Lange and Lee had limited influence over the postproduction of the photographs. The framing and captioning of images come from the government’s specialists. Therefore, Lange and Lee had no control on the full photographic process.6 The second answer could be the specific interpersonal reaction during the crisis. As the research of Fujihata shows, the parents did not tell their children what was happening on that day. Additionally, as I mentioned before, some of the photos are staged. Firstly, we see many charming children and smiling faces here—but if we look at the images longer, we perceive the disturbing gazes and micro signs of forced mimics.7

Fujihata’s work exposes these critical gaps in propaganda descriptions, modifications, and traces of the development of the photos. However, this does not mean that the Japanese artist is rejecting the work of American photographers associated with the famous FSA program.8 He tries to replace or modify those aspects of Lange’s and Lee’s works that appear post factum in the 1940s. Fujihata discusses and deconstructs the media mechanisms of these days. The exhibition does not make explicit judgments about the creative strategies of Lange and Lee, and therefore, it does not tarnish the reputation of the famous photographers.

Through the example of a single event, the exhibition exposes the axiological themes of documentary photography. The participant can ask here again the questions about the photographer’s role and creative strategies towards this and similar events. For example, what would be a fair strategy for the photographer towards the victims and the people photographed? How should we describe the limits of artistic freedom and the fairness of the documentalist here? In the context of BeHere/1942, we can consider these questions by referring to the publication Impounded: Dorothea Lange and the Censored Images of Japanese American Internment. Linda Gordon underlines in her chapter that the series about the imprisonment of Japanese Americans by Lange demonstrates not only her skills in composition and the visual condensation of human feelings and relationships but also her political courage as she showed unjustified, unnecessary, and racist actions.9 The works of the famous photographer did not follow the mass hysteria around Pearl Harbor at all. As Fujihata believes, Lange’s negatives from 1942 say the opposite of what was told by them.

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8 Lange, Impounded, 24.
9 See Emmerich and Huhtamo, BeHere/1942.
We can suppose that to save their beliefs and features of documental workshops, Lange and Lee had to build their strategies. Fujihata believes that the distance between the photographer and photographed was crucial here. That is why the contemporary creators of BeHere/1942 spent much time analyzing the positions, features of spaces, and cameras used by Lange and Lee. It is closely related to Fujihata’s intention for the exhibition to give visitors the chance to experience what it is like to be a photographer.

A member of the project, Yasutaka Fukuda, analyzed Russell Lee’s camera equipment. Thanks to this, we can pinpoint the photographer’s position. This information is presented in the exhibition to provide a deeper understanding of the photographic techniques used by Lange and Lee. Crucial is the photograph “Yukiko Okinaga at the Old Santa Fe station” by Russell Lee, which shows a girl, Yukiko Okinaga, waiting at the train station, sitting on a small suitcase. Fukada
analyzed Lee’s workshop to reveal details of the act of photography itself. The analysis was a part of constructing the user experience in augmented reality. The creators of the contemporary exhibition developed a subversive way of revealing the act of photography by Lange and Lee, asking technical and emotional questions about how photos shape the gaze and how to construct narratives by them.

Inspired by Lange’s style, which prioritizes the maintenance of emotional and visual contact with subjects, Fujihata aimed to use AR to break the distance constructed by the older medium. He believes that a close and personalized relationship with objects and models is easier to bring about through AR technology. This approach links to Fujihata’s objective of constructing little narratives centered around specific individuals and their stories. Participants interact with models not as a shapeless mass but as representations of people holding the situations.

For Fujihata, the exhibition is primarily a visual experience. According to the artist, by the app, viewers engage their mental space of visual comparison, which builds the conviction (through constant comparisons) of their memories and visual stimulus. The exhibition does not aim to enable visitors to experience past
events, which is impossible, but instead encourages visitors to compare what they know and perceive to create their memories based on the exhibition’s experience. To understand this issue better, we should describe previous of Fujihata’s activities.

Throughout his career, the Japanese artist has focused not so much on technological solutions but on the processes that generate outputs. A notable example is his early work *Forbidden Fruits* from 1990, which demonstrated the production of acrylic sculptures created from digital models (reminiscent of the 3D printers’ way of working). The artist himself did not consider the final products to be works of art but was only interested in the process of materialization and its relationship to the practice of object modeling. This idea reveals the experimental nature of his work, which underlines the transformation rather than the work itself.

Another important aspect of his work is collaboration with the user. Fujihata observes how we interact with the interactive installations he produces and concludes with how we interact with his systems. It is evident in his most famous work, *Beyond Pages* (1995–1997), as well as in *Voices of Aliveness* (2012), which covers the collective experiences of participants. Through his works, Fujihata has often questioned ways of living in the new hybrid reality—which we have experienced in full glory over the last two decades. An important aspect of his creative strategies is that he does not focus on the identity or the ontology of “new media worlds,” but on the prospects of building social relations in a hybrid, multimodal, multisensory space. As Fujihata confesses: “In retrospect, all of my experiments with visual media were just an attempt to understand the morphology of visual perception, using methods that were antipodal to those of neuroscience.” This statement provides us with a view of his working strategies, which involve an intuitive, subjective, or emotional understanding of hybrid, media-related reality. It is a good foundation for experiments with people’s media sources, such as exhibitions.

Another notable context for *BeHere/1942* is covered by *Anarchive 6* (probably the most complex book about his works). It discusses the reflection of the artist between analog and digital photography. According to Fujihata, computing regards objectivization, and that is why digital photography is not about “shooting” events, which is impossible, but instead encourages visitors to compare what they know and perceive to create their memories based on the exhibition’s experience. To understand this issue better, we should describe previous of Fujihata’s activities.

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but “scanning.”

The cameraman’s use of analog devices can personalize the act, but in digital photography, we have the scanning medium rather than the subject who frames the situation. Fujihata emphasizes that the relationships between devices, photographers, and photographs has changed, as well as the reality mediatized by artistic practices. In the hybridized spaces, there is no perspectival dimension of optics. The role of the technologically conscious artist is to work with the models, textures, data about the localization, and colors. Fujihata does not judge the processes of digitalization of art. Instead, he is fascinated by it and tries to measure objects and synthesize them by computation.

His reflection on hybridized reality and the role of the artist in it allows him to speculate about the concept of generating memory, which I think is the key issue of BeHere/1942. Fujihata writes:

> The networking of computers has begun to blur the borders between one’s memories and the memories of others, as well as the boundaries of past and present. Memory is intimately related to the generation of reality (the sense that one exists in the present). Because of our memories, we are capable of safely situating ourselves in the present; at the same time, memories prevent us from experiencing things anew.

In this sense, making works open for personalized user invention with media is not just a form of playing with digital objects. Making art interactive and public is a form of the user’s externalization. According to the artist, technology can broaden our access to information and experiences. Then, the self and reality can not be experienced by pre-digital consciousness.

By exploring the generating memory idea and examining works such as BeHere/1942, we can consider more deeply Fujihata’s augmented reality art. In addition to his pioneering work in experimental practices involving mobility, networking, and localization, we can also appreciate his focus on issues related to collective or generative memory in artificial reality. Thanks to Fujihata’s systems, users can access experiences that span multiple layers of representation. One such layer involves the transfer of memory and self to a new, technologically-supported level.

The issues of covering critical gaps in media narration, experiencing the exhibition structure, and exploring Fujihata’s generative memory concept all relate to BeHere/1942, Fujihata’s latest project. The exhibition engages participants on multiple

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14 Duguet, 17.
15 Duguet, 17.
levels of relationship with the media used, prompting them to reflect on their beliefs about the constancy and framework of the documentary disposition of photography as a historical document, to process what happens beyond them—with contemporary networked media, and to consider photography as a form of establishment not only of the rules of representation but also power relations.

Analog photography, as commonly perceived, is a non-interactive medium due to its compact structure and lack of direct possibility for interaction with it. However, the digital and networked experience of *BeHere/1942* offers a new perspective on the reception of analog photography by coupling it with other technologies and making its configurable nature more apparent. Through digitalization and the wildly structured participation in the exhibition, the artist draws attention to the social processes of photographic creation and the relationships observed under the influence of the camera between the photographer, the positions in spaces, and the role the photographer assumes. Therefore, the exhibition challenges the common understanding of analog photography as a non-interactive medium.

*BeHere/1942* is not a nostalgic excursion about the world of analog photography, despite its historical disposition. It attempts to understand it from a contemporary user’s position, aware of the forms of influence of interactive media. Fujihata’s digitization of analog photography is an artistic and research tool. The higher levels of resolution in the first room serve as an example of Fujihata’s use of digitization to draw attention to the social processes of photographic creation. The exhibition focuses on the positions of the photographer and the power mechanisms involved in photography itself. Fujihata’s work presents the photographer’s position as the personal position of a human being caught up in the power of discourse. Thus, the point (from which the photo comes) is not innocent, objective, or symmetrical; it establishes discourses of power. This idea underpins the exhibition—prompts visitors to reflect on the act of photography linked to social relationships.

It is worth noting that cultural anthropology and performance studies have, at times, turned their attention to the question of the performativity of photography. They reveal the dialectical nature of photography, such as its fixity and inconstancy, as well as its causality within and outside the framework of the image. The issue of photography as a historical source, which was also analyzed by Fujihata, seems particularly interesting in this context. The artist’s strategy remains in line with the recognition of visual history theorists such as Elizabeth

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Edwards, who understands photography as a “heuristic device” through which “we can see images as active through their performativity, as the past is projected actively into the present by the nature of the photograph itself and the act of looking at a photograph.” Fujihata would probably disagree that photography has any fixed nature, but I suppose he shares similar thinking—regarding photography, history, and culture. According to this thinking, the act of photography itself, its participants, and its technique are inseparable from the photograph and can be more fully understood as a conglomerate.

Like Edwards and many other cultural anthropologists concerned with the visuality of history, the Japanese artist rejects photography as an “evidentiary tool.” Instead, he focuses on photographs as media for constructing new visual narratives by analyzing positions, looking for “intersections” and “ruptures” of visual communication. Above all, Fujihata abandons simple, “symmetrical” forms of thinking about the relationships between the photography, the object, and the representation; he seeks what happens between and beneath. On this level, BeHere/1942 touches on the performativity of historical photography.

BeHere/1942, supported by newly developed technological solutions, challenges certain aspects of the narrative surrounding the historical event. It enables participants to re-experience these events through an intermedia system and invites critical reflection on visual sources. Fujihata employs highly recognized creative strategies that appear in his earlier works, but applies them in a more specific (and perhaps less universal) context. In this sense, BeHere/1942 delves into more individual forms of human experience than his previous works. The artist himself departs somewhat from the meta-artistic themes he has explored in the past. The project’s multilayered dispositions demonstrate the maturity and thoughtfulness of the artistic endeavor. In an interview with the artist, he expressed his plans to focus on securing his works rather than creating the next. However, if we believe a statement patronizing BeHere/1942 that “the past is always new,” updating previous works does not mean departing from the media art scene.

18 See Edwards, “Photography.”
19 See Emmerich and Huhtamo, BeHere/1942.
Bibliography


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