

Maps are, by definition, abstractions of the reality they purport to present. They can help locate a point in space or navigate from one place to another, but such practical uses are underpinned by a question far more existential: Where am I? As a result, these symbolic systems reflect the aims, biases, knowledge gaps, and political and historical moments of their makers. We find these idiosyncrasies vividly apparent in older diagrams but recognize them less easily in maps made today, when the sheer volume of available data seems to imply both objectivity and omniscience.

Sohei Nishino's *Diorama Maps*, featured here in the artist's first solo exhibition in the United States, recover the complexity of mapmaking, fusing the humanism of cartographic history with the informational overwhelm of the digital age. Each composed of thousands of individual pictures, these city views are chaotic and radically fractured, conjuring a photographer who is everywhere and nowhere all at once. Indeed, their disorienting appearance suggests a collapse of Google Maps perspectives, toggling between the aerial precision of the flat cartographic grid and the immediacy of the immersive Street View. Whereas Google uses anonymous, camera-equipped cars to systematically scan a city and all-seeing satellites that hover above the earth, however, Nishino's eye discriminates. His pasted-together maps, their disjointed construction so unlike the seamless stitching a computer can easily execute, are representations of his memories: as much self-portraits as collections of singular moments in time and space. In these pictures, the urgent desire to make sense of one's place in the world comes smack up against its fundamental unknowability.

Nishino began the series some thirteen years ago, and his meticulous process has remained more or less the same ever since. Over the course of several months he walks through a chosen city and makes photographs as he goes. Armed with a paper map but adhering to no prescribed route, he allows his own impulses and instincts to guide him. He takes pictures that include iconic landmarks but gives equal weight to lesser-known neighborhoods and sights. He still shoots film, seeing the materiality of the medium as an analogue to his own bodily experience of the city. Back in his darkroom outside Tokyo, Nishino processes the hundreds of rolls of exposed film and makes contact sheets. The tiny frames from these sheets form the substance of his map: he cuts out the individual images—thousands of them—and pastes them, one by one, to a board. It is a painstaking task, done entirely by hand. Each map, from start to finish, can consume the better part of half a year. When the final collage is complete, he documents it with a high-resolution digital photograph, effectively erasing the physical traces of his intensive labor. The resulting, flawless print is so large and sharp that the viewer is fairly lost in the abundance of visual information.

Below: *Diorama Map Rio de Janeiro*, 2011; chromogenic print, 68 7/8 x 59 1/16 in. (175 x 150 cm). Right: *Diorama Map Havana*, 2016 (detail); chromogenic print, 41 1/16 x 66 15/16 in. (105 x 170 cm)

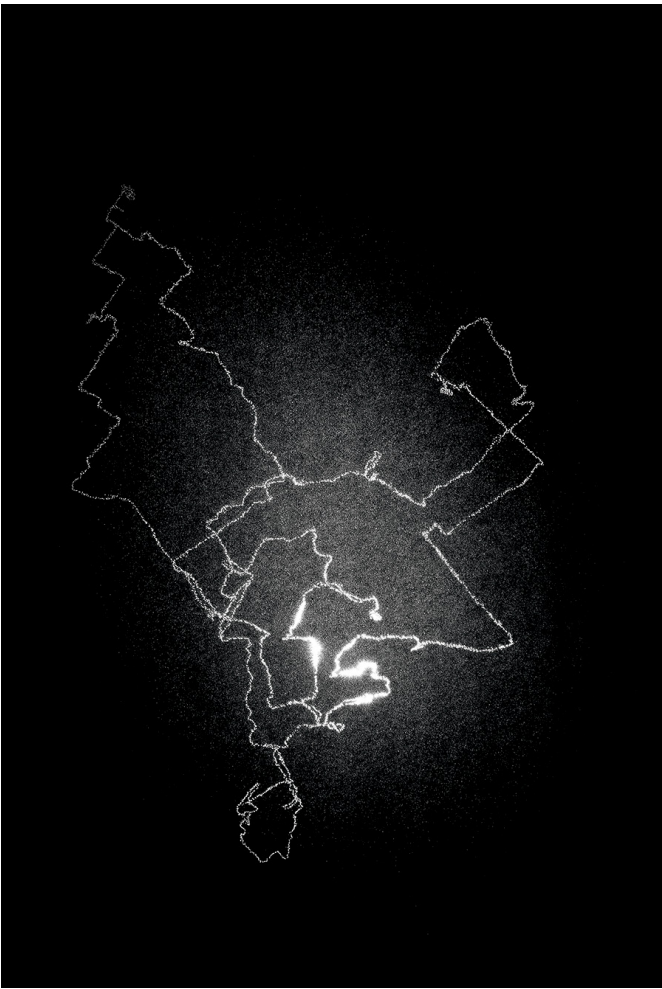
Each city Nishino photographs poses its own set of geographic and social challenges. His earliest works were made in his native Japan, but he has since moved on to Europe, Africa, and North and South America. A site's instantly recognizable landmarks—Amsterdam's canals, Jerusalem's Western Wall, Rio de Janeiro's colossus of Christ the Redeemer—serve as visual anchors for the viewer, as do the gross contours of the city boundaries. The interstices are filled in with a thousand tiny details, included only for their personal significance to the artist. Because Nishino shoots from every conceivable angle, adopting both very high and very low vantage points, the resulting composite images comprise multiple and sometimes even conflicting points of view. These perspectival dislocations are amplified by radical shifts in scale. Even the most familiar sights of a city are made strange through his lens. As he says, laughingly, if you actually used his maps for wayfinding, "you'd get lost."¹

Diorama Maps took shape while Nishino was still a student at Osaka University of Arts. He started out studying painting, but an opportunity to participate in a traditional Japanese pilgrimage fundamentally changed the course of his work. The Shikoku pilgrimage, which, if undertaken in its entirety, is a 750-mile trek around eighty-eight Buddhist temples on the island of Shikoku, is an occasion for spiritual reflection. For Nishino, the experience of traveling with nothing but a tent, a sleeping bag, and a camera produced a feeling of mental clarity, a sharpening of the senses. It also cemented the importance of both walking and photography to his practice.



Walking is a convenient means of getting from point A to point B. But since the romantic era, writers and artists ranging from Henry David Thoreau to Janet Cardiff have recognized that the physical act of walking, whether a purposeful trek or aimless meandering, can generate creative ideas, even art itself. Nishino's peripatetic practice perhaps most closely recalls that of the English artist Richard Long, for whom walking serves as both process and subject matter (and whom Nishino cites as an influence). Long's breakthrough work of 1967, *A Line Made by Walking*, is a photograph of a narrow, straight line of trampled grass made by his own repeated footfalls through a field. This same powerfully simple melding of performance and photography runs quietly through Nishino's work. Part surveyor, part conceptual artist, and part diarist, Nishino creates deeply idiosyncratic representations that adhere faithfully to his own emotional and physical relationship to a city, if not to its geography.

Just as walking changed his approach, Nishino's adoption of photography also transformed his art. As a student he found that both the camera and the solitude of high vantage points provided welcome psychological and physical distance from the world below. He began by making postcard-size works from the tops of tall buildings as if he were walking in the sky, imagining himself moving through the metropolis from another person's point of view. At the same time, he turned his attention to his contact sheets. Intended as a tool for editing a roll of film down to a few choice frames, for Nishino the page of thirty-six tiny images seems to offer documentation—a map of sorts—of his paths and encounters, and to reveal his interests and even personality. He uses every single



frame of the contact sheet to make his collaged works, each providing a stand-alone record of a moment in time, each a minute fragment of a larger experience.

Nishino's map of San Francisco, made especially for this exhibition, is the twentieth in the series. Though the core of his process has remained constant for more than a decade, it has nonetheless evolved. The number of frames he shoots has grown—from two thousand for his earliest maps to some twenty thousand for recent projects—as his scale and outlook have become more ambitious. From the outset he has insisted on maintaining the position of an outsider; by limiting his stay in a given location to no more than two months, he can retain the fresh eyes and neutrality of a visitor. Recently, however, Nishino's scope has broadened to include more of the human side of the city. Though the social shield the camera provides was part of the initial appeal of the project, the artist has developed an increasing sensitivity to the cultural fabric of each place he photographs. One might be forgiven for thinking that his earlier works mapped uninhabited models, but *Diorama Map Havana* (2016), for example, reflects Nishino's amazement at the way the life of the city "pour[s] out into the streets." His itinerary in

14 June, 2014, Amsterdam, 2014; inkjet print, 18 1/8 x 12 1/16 in. (47.3 x 31.9 cm)

San Francisco included its zany annual costumed footrace, Bay to Breakers, and its legendary LGBT Pride Parade. Though he began by looking down on the city from a distance, his vantage point has since altered: he asserts that his practice has changed as it has, in turn, changed him.

In a moment when our collective blind dependence on navigational technologies has grown so widespread that "death by GPS"—accidents caused by unquestioning obedience to the system's instructions, even when they fly in the face of common sense—has become a routine news event, Nishino models a different way of moving through the world. He uses his GPS not as a predictive tool but to record and reconstruct where he has already been. Last year he began a new series called *Day Drawings*, in which he translates the positioning data the device gathers into photographs, both extending the concept of the *Diorama Maps* and radically abstracting it. Mapping his route on the computer and then placing a piece of paper over the screen, Nishino documents his path by delicately punching holes along its contours. This perforated sheet serves as a negative when light is shone through, forming white lines that weave like digital contrails across exposed and darkened photo paper. These luminous, wavering traces, describing erratic shapes and doubling back on themselves, bear another form of witness to his wanderings. Where the *Diorama Maps* are exuberant revels in the urban landscape, the *Day Drawings* are elegantly spare and even sober. Stripped of any reference to either geography or scale, these records of Nishino's daily trajectories could equally represent the paths of an insect or constellations in the sky.

Nishino's series are deeply personal, histories of one particular man making his own unpredictable way through the cities of the world. The forces that drive him, however, are ancient and universal. Together they suggest something of the mystery, and perhaps even the unmappability, of human experience.

Corey Keller
Curator of Photography

Notes

1. Sohei Nishino, interview by the author and Erica Gangsei, June 15, 2016. All quotations and most of the background information in this essay are drawn from this interview.

Sohei Nishino was born in Hyogo, Japan, in 1982. He began his series *Diorama Maps* as a student at Osaka University of Arts. He graduated in 2004 and received the Excellence Award in Canon's New Cosmos of Photography competition the following year. Since then his work has been shown internationally in both solo and group exhibitions, including the 2010 Daegu Photo Biennale, Daegu Culture and Arts Center, South Korea; *Contemporary Japanese Photography* Vol. 10, Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography (2011–12); *Out of Focus: Photography*, Saatchi Gallery, London (2012); *A Different Kind of Order: The ICP Triennial*, International Center of Photography, New York (2013); and *Of Walking*, Museum of Contemporary Photography, Columbia College Chicago (2013). In 2013 Nishino received the Newcomer's Award from the Photographic Society of Japan and was chosen for *Foam Magazine's* Talent Call.

Works in the Exhibition

Unless otherwise indicated, all works are courtesy the artist and Michael Hoppen Gallery, London.

<i>Diorama Map London</i> , 2010 Chromogenic print 50 1/8 x 90 1/16 in. (128 x 230 cm)	Selections from the series <i>Day Drawings</i> [San Francisco], 2016 Inkjet prints Each: 18 1/8 x 12 1/16 in. (47.3 x 31.9 cm) <i>8 May, 2016, San Francisco</i> <i>12 May, 2016, San Francisco</i> <i>13 May, 2016, San Francisco</i> <i>14 May, 2016, San Francisco</i> <i>16 May, 2016, San Francisco</i> <i>17 May, 2016, San Francisco</i>
<i>Diorama Map Rio de Janeiro</i> , 2011 Chromogenic print 68 7/8 x 59 1/16 in. (175 x 150 cm)	<i>19 May, 2016, San Francisco</i> <i>20 May, 2016, San Francisco</i> <i>22 May, 2016, San Francisco</i> <i>26 May, 2016, San Francisco</i> <i>29 May, 2016, San Francisco</i>
<i>Diorama Map Jerusalem</i> , 2013 Chromogenic print 39 1/8 x 45 15/16 in. (100 x 117 cm) Collection of Gregory Welteroth	<i>5 June, 2016, San Francisco</i> <i>10 June, 2016, San Francisco</i> <i>11 June, 2016, San Francisco</i> <i>22 June, 2016, San Francisco</i> <i>23 June, 2016, San Francisco</i> <i>24 June, 2016, San Francisco</i> <i>25 June, 2016, San Francisco</i>
<i>Diorama Map Amsterdam</i> , 2014 Chromogenic print 70 1/2 x 80 1/16 in. (179.1 x 204 cm)	<i>27 June, 2016, San Francisco</i> <i>28 June, 2016, San Francisco</i>
<i>Diorama Map Tokyo</i> , 2014 Chromogenic print 47 1/4 x 63 in. (120 x 160 cm)	
<i>Diorama Map Havana</i> , 2016 Chromogenic print 41 1/16 x 66 15/16 in. (105 x 170 cm)	
<i>Diorama Map San Francisco</i> , 2016 Chromogenic print 70 1/8 x 106 1/16 in. (180 x 271 cm)	

This listing reflects the information available at the time of publication.

Reverse: Sohei Nishino, *Diorama Map Tokyo*, 2014 (detail); chromogenic print, 47 1/4 x 63 in. (120 x 160 cm)

All images © Sohei Nishino. Courtesy the artist and Michael Hoppen Gallery, London

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