Photographing the Other
A European View on Japan

In spring 1886 Berlin based architect Wilhelm Böckmann travels to Japan with the assignment to plan a modern government district in Japan's new capital Tokyo. Just recently the capital has been moved from ancient Kyoto to Edo which was renamed into ›Tokyo‹ which means ›Eastern Capital‹. Böckmann has the special assignment to plan the ministry of justice building, the central courthouse and the parliamentary building. The architect's office of Ende and Böckmann has received the commission because Japan at this time tries to catch up with Western nations in order to be considered equal by them.

From the beginning of the 17th century through the mid 19th century Japan had closed itself off from other countries, neither admitting foreigners to Japan nor allowing Japanese to travel abroad. In 1854 Japan's opening was forced by foreign powers, especially the United States. To avert colonization Japan felt the urge to comply with the claims of Western nations and carefully opened its ports for international trade. After a period of interior struggles a process of restructuring began, leading to the restoration of the emperor in 1868 and the passing of a new constitution in 1889. Throughout the second half of the 19th century especially Japan's first foreign minister Inoue Kaoru considered the acquirement of western customs like ballroom dancing or western architecture a part in achieving the goal of closing the gap on Western nations and being considered equal.

In July 1886 Böckmann writes into his journal: »I want to write something about the country itself, which I liked so much, but I myself experienced, that even the most adept pen can inspire a wrong conception in our fantasy. I therefore want to give only a brief account of a few of my perceptions. To begin with, it astounded me that the country, wherever I stepped ashore, looked much more European than I ever expected. Before leaving Berlin I had posed the naïve question to the local mission if there were bricks used in Japanese construction, thereby producing a proper European brick to prevent misunderstandings. Upon my

request I did not meet with a denial but the answer was so vague that I concluded, only by way of exception this material is implemented. […]

How surprised I was when arriving in Kobe, Yokohama, Tokyo to find European style cities everywhere with spruce, partly noble solid houses, smokestacks that are designed high and slender almost in accordance with German custom.

I was particularly astonished at finding Tokyo quite interspersed with modern buildings that mostly hold government institutions, but also residences of princes and dignitaries. Certainly, the main institutions have been constructed first and are therefore situated in timber houses of European appearance; luckily for me otherwise I had not been summoned there.« [Böckmann: 1886, 125f., translation: B.L.]

This quote from Wilhelm Böckmann's journal reveals that the expectations raised towards Japan by Europeans already in the 19th century do not comply with the actual experiences on site. The accounts of Japan that are known to Böckmann before his travels point to things unfamiliar or even exotic, therefore he is surprised about the European appearance of Japanese cities. Obviously he was expecting to find almost exclusively traditional Japanese architecture.

Within the more than 120 years that have passed since Böckmann's residence in Japan, Japan has altered a great deal. The period of rapprochement to Europe in the 19th century is followed by imperial and expansionist militarism in combination with the return to Japanese traditions and values. The era of militarism results in the Second World War with carpet bombing of Japanese cities and US-American occupation. The following economic boom eventually turns Japan into one of the leading industrial nations worldwide. Accordingly, the European conceptions of Japan have changed greatly – just as the country itself. But there is one constant in the perception of Japan that seems to remain untouched: the expectation of Otherness [Fremdartigkeit] and Difference [Andersartigkeit]. Even today Japanese culture is presumed to be very different from ours. Nowadays this

perception is not only attached to traditional elements of Japanese society but also – among others – to current characteristics of Japan as a progressive turbo-high-tech-nation.

The Difference of Foreign Culture

The expectation towards Japan's being different because of its high technical standards and postmodern developments or its cultural tradition usually is fueled by narratives and images. In magazines or television broadcasts various aspects of difference are conveyed no matter if they are based in traditional culture or technical developments. Thus topics covered are usually either those *deviant* from our culture or those entering our day-to-day lives: the last concerning for instance sushi as form of Japanese cuisine or manga books and anime films which are also popular in Europe and other Western countries. Accordingly, even if we have not visited Japan, most of us have an image of Japan in our heads that is composed of traditional and postmodern elements with more or less complex shades.

But this Western image of Japan seems far too rigid or even stereotypical, if considered more closely. We have to ask ourselves if Japanese culture is really as claimed in the accounts of numerous travelogues or images brought along. Records in text and image usually make no claim to be complete. Who would presume to be able to convey the entire truth about Japanese society and culture anyway? Still it is striking that multitudinous beliefs of Japan are repeated seemingly unquestioned and steadfast that the number of repetitions alone could raise doubts about their absoluteness.

Stereotypes primarily emerge from the generalization of observable conditions and their constant repetition in discourse. Thus there is no room for deviant narratives. In this case the foreign culture is – as I would like to put it – frozen as »different« [das Andere]. This complies with the idea of a complete »difference« of the foreign culture, the »cultural Other« [das kulturell Fremde].

In dealing with foreign cultures – as found in the example of Japan – there is, firstly, the idea of difference. This belief usually is strengthened by accounts and images of the foreign culture showing only aspects of deviation to one's own culture, not thinking about parallels that may exist as well. Showing only aspects of difference means in a way freezing the image of the foreign culture, not allowing for change or alternative aspects. This way of dealing with the cultural Other is in a way stereotypical – or at least biased.

The persistence of prejudices and the experience of expectations not concurring with observations on site demonstrate that in the monitoring and depiction of the cultural Other aspects of deviance as well as the particular and the specific usually prevail. It is often forgotten that elements within the foreign culture may be found similar to one's own, which allow comparison or show parallels between cultures. The cause for this blind spot is possibly to be sought in the fact that one's own culture is often used as a basis for comparison without specifically broaching this as issue of reflection. Only the observed is of importance: And here the different often seems to be more interesting than that what appears to be similar and already known from at home. This type of gaze from time to time avoids the deliberate reflection of the roots of one's own anticipations and the resulting preoccupations.

The Different and the Other
At this point I want to explain my use of a certain terminology differentiating between »the Different« [German: das Andere] and »the Other« [German: das Fremde]. The use of these English terms is in a way difficult as they are regularly used in various ways. My use of these terms results from the differentiation between »das Andere« »the Different» and »das Fremde« »the Other«: two German terms that are often used synonymously. In my terminology I am mainly following German phenomenology, especially the philosopher Bernhard Waldenfels who has written many books concerning the encounter with the Other. While many anthropologists use both terms »anders« and »fremd« synonymously, Waldenfels points to the importance of telling them apart as their

meaning is, according to him, not identical at all.

According to Waldenfels, »the Different« is told apart by a third, neutral instance that, for example, can differentiate between apples and pears or a table and a chair. This operation is reversible, therefore »a does not equal b« or vice versa, »b does not equal a« [Waldenfels 1997: 20]. Once this discrimination has been made it is fixed. Things are being told apart because of a ›specific difference‹ but not because they tell *themselves* apart [cf. ibid.].

By contrast, the term »the Other« is used for describing a *relation* between the familiar and the foreign. Therefore »the Other« is not distinguished by a neutral observer or a third instance: the self becomes aware of the Other against the background of the familiar. Therefore the familiar is put into focus on the occasion of encountering the Other. If »the Different« is told apart just once and for all, the perception of the Other is subject to a process of perpetual adjustment of boundaries, the generation of blurred transitions between the Other and the familiar by the self, thus forming a discrepancy to the mere determination of the distinction between things different by a third instance.

To be more articulate: the self is always affected by Otherness. When encountering a foreign culture there is no neutral instance to name a specific difference between one's own culture and the foreign culture. Rather I myself have to define my own relation towards the other culture using my own cultural background as base of operation.

Why is it important to point to the difference of terminology for a photographic project? Depicting the Other means to show a foreign culture to people who may not have encountered the foreign culture before. Therefore, they form their ideas of the foreign culture by looking at photographs and listening to stories told or reading narratives about this culture. Maybe just watching the news gives everybody a certain idea. If the records of the foreign culture – here I want to talk about photographs – just show it to be different from one's own this may result in

stereotyping. If I – as photographer – do not want to become part of this process, I have to think about a way to depict the Other in a way, that the viewers of my images may make up their own minds about the Otherness of the foreign culture depicted. Thus just showing the foreign culture as different seems not to be the right way. Therefore I now want to talk more about my ideas in the conception of the project and certain choices I made on the way, finally discussing the results that you can see in the projection in the back.

The Term »Contact Zone«

For a better understanding of my photographic project I chose a title that can be read in different ways. For me it was important not to include a geographical specification in the title. Even though the project is exclusively photographed in Japan, I wanted to hint to something broader, that has to do with intercultural encounters and not only with Japan. Thus the term »contact zone« – without plunging into academic discourse – can be read as a geographical space of cultural encounter. Maybe more important are the academic implications of the term »contact zone« which has been coined by the US-American literary scholar Mary Louise Pratt. With the term »contact zone« Pratt describes »social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination – like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today« [Pratt: 1992, 4].

The concept of the »contact zone« greatly differs from other concepts of the encounter with the Other, because here observer and observed are being reflected together at the same time *despite* their asymmetrical relations. The observer him-/herself becomes part of the encounter with the Other.

Thus a contrast is formed towards former, for instance ethnographic concepts of participant observation. Those concepts simply forgot about the influence on the daily lives of the observed people within the foreign culture carried on by the observers' presence. But early ethnography usually dealt with the observation of

village people therefore patterns of influence were quite different from those exerted in a city.

Pratt's concept of the »contact zone« traces back to the history of cultural contact and tries to clarify that the seemingly neutral gaze of the ethnographer is coined by the – mostly colonial – relations between cultures. Therefore neutrality in observation or depiction cannot be obtained. But by openly confronting the asymmetry of the situation this aspect is no longer hidden.

The situation between observer – here meaning the photographer – and the photographed culture is and will always stay asymmetrical – even without colonial background. Within the depiction – meaning the publication of images of the observations – the observer will always be in control of the presentation of the foreign culture. The members of the observed culture usually do not have any influence on their depiction.

But the culture of the observer also influences the culture of the observed. This phenomenon of selection and absorption of foreign influences into one's own culture called »transculturation« is, according to Mary Louise Pratt, also a phenomenon of the »contact zone«. Thus the impact is reciprocal. The »contact zone« is a space of cultural encounter and mutual influence.

My influence as a photographer on the foreign culture, especially within a metropolis like Tokyo, may be existent, but of course it cannot be detected. In other words: this work is not about calculating my personal influence on the experienced situation in the moment of releasing the shutter. But of course I have a stake in the impression the viewers of my images get from the foreign culture. And this also is a form of the asymmetry towards the foreign culture mentioned by Mary Louise Pratt.

This means, firstly, that also my photographs are part of the social space called »contact zone«. Secondly, with the use of the term »contact zone« I try to hint to

the reciprocity of cultural influences. Thirdly, within my project I am not reflecting aspects of difference of Japanese culture but I am directly working on the European influences and their manifest forms that can be encountered in Japanese cities today.

Considering these points I hope it becomes apparent that I was particularly interested in picturing those aspects of Japanese culture that our Western tradition tends to blank out from Japanese reality: The obvious traces of a permanent cultural contact for the past 150 years, aspects that remind us of our own day-to-day life or the looks of our cities; things that are not quite spectacular and above all: not different enough for the tourist gaze.

To draw the connecting line: The term »contact zone« may not form the basis of my project in its academic complexity. Rather I am using it in an associative manner. For me the »contact zone« is on the one hand a geographical space where different cultural influences have been and still are correlating. This is the tangible territory where I – as a photographer – am moving. On the other hand this term gives me the opportunity to reflect upon my attitude and my initial ideas towards the observed as well as my own cultural traditions of observing Japanese culture and ignoring certain aspects within.

The Tangible Photographic Project

In spring 2006, on the occasion of a three months residency in Japan, I decided to choose the visible European influences in Japan as the focal point of my photographic project: as a kind of counter movement to – according to my assumption – stereotypical depictions of Japan. Concentrating on this aspect of Japanese culture certainly blanks out quite a few elements that are usually part of the depiction of Japan. As a basic principle my project assumes that the prevalent imagery of Japan is known.

Thus my photographs differ in various crucial points from the familiar images of Japan: to cite an example there is the abandonment of color. The black and white

photography creates a distance towards the often shrill coloring of Japanese urbanity becoming manifest in colorful neon signs, video walls, and billboards which are usually propagated by photographs in glossy magazines or in television documentaries on Japan. This distance allows to concentrate on structural elements.

Comparable to other projects »Contact Zone« deals with the urban Japan. This is motivated with regards to content. I am not interested in showing structural similarities in comparable situations as they may also be found within the landscape. Rather I am concerned with the examination of historical conditions whose effects can still be traced in the cityscapes of Japanese metropolises today.

The selection of the locations photographed can be seen in relation to this aspect. There is Tokyo, the newly established capital of 1868, which is – as we already know from Wilhelm Böckmann, with the help of Western architects – extended to be the center of the Japanese government. There are the two metropolises of Osaka and Kyoto, which mark important trade- and economical centers. And there are Yokohama, Kobe, and Nagasaki, three important treaty port cities, that were opened for Western ships and allowed the settlement of Western foreigners early in the second half of the 19th century.

The city of Nagasaki in the south of Japan occupies an exceptional position among the treaty ports. Even throughout the 250 years of closure against foreign countries from the beginning of the 17th century the small artificial island of Dejima located in the bay of Nagasaki hosted a small Dutch trade-mission, which provided for contacts between Europe and Japan. Therefore Japanese scholars were at all times informed about the European developments and inventions – for instance within the fields of science and medicine – even during the period of closure.

All three former treaty ports are characterized by the conservation of the former

settlements of foreigners: in Kobe and Nagasaki some architectural structures are accessible as tourist attractions; in Yokohama, apart from the historical houses transformed into museums, nowadays there are still many foreign institutions to be found: the German school is located in Yokohama as well as various Christian churches or the foreigner's cemetery.

Now you may ask, why the particular locations are not stated in captions, if they do matter for the project. I have been asked repeatedly where one or the other photograph has been taken. I want to ask back if the knowledge about the specific site of the photograph can actually add something for understanding the images? Of course, those who have already traveled to those cities can say that they have either seen the original photographed spots or that they have missed them. For everyone else, who have not been to Japan before, the captions may help to develop an alleged comprehension in terms of: »Ah, this is how Nagasaki, Yokohama, Kyoto look!« But naturally it does not generally look like THAT. The inclusion of captions seems to conflict with the attentive examination of the photographs, because it suggests that the images contain *real* information that can be read out and understood. A caption opens a rational context suggesting that the image can be received comparable to textual information. Let me put it this way: With the use of captions the intrinsic impact of the image is reduced to its information content. And this is what I want to avoid. The main purpose of my images is not to inform but to affect the viewers.

Some of the locations photographed may even have extensive historical or symbolical meaning, because they hosted events that have a special share in the relations between Japan and Europe. But eventually the historical references rather help me as photographer to find and choose the locations where I want to photograph than being relevant for the reception of the images. The photographs are not intended to be read like a travel guidebook to communicate a tangible geographical reference. By interacting with each other the images are supposed to unfold a self-contained impression. Of course they are inviting the viewers to create specific references for themselves. These conjunctions linked to one's

previous knowledge and interests can be geared out to existing images of Japan or the knowledge about comparable locations or architectural structures. Though I hope that the images are able to persist in their effect and stand up to attempts of associative classification. The thematic background merely provides the outer frame within which the images *as images* shall stand and take effect for themselves.

The Photographic Approach on Location

In order to find the accurate locations in the cities that, according to my prior research, would show the European influences, at first I used an architecture guidebook. My quest was to find architectural structures that were either built by Western architects and their Japanese students or that were influenced by Western architecture. This approach allowed for orientation in the – at first – unknown cities. However, I did not intend to create a photographic inventory of still existing structures that survived earthquakes and war bombings. This could be achieved more successfully by using a large format camera in an approach of classical architecture photography.

In my photographs I rather wanted to commit myself to the experience of day-to-day life. In many areas of the cities I traveled to, architectural traces still refer to European influence and coexist harmoniously with other architectural styles and forms just as we can find different architectural styles from varying eras coexisting harmoniously in many European cities. These manifest structures shape the backdrop for everyday life of the foreign culture that is taking place within the public realm – made visible in my photographs.

For me it is very important that – in a manner of speaking – also things Japanese are included in the photographs. I do not intend to initiate some kind of searching game where the viewers start to puzzle over the question if the images have really been taken in Japan or maybe in Berlin after all. A puzzle picture [Suchbild] would again be a picture the information of which can be apprehended, or, in this case, unraveled. Therefore, most of the photographs refer in some way to the

place of their onset. Including, for instance, power and telephone lines that in Japan always run above ground, Japanese people on the streets, the vegetation, or architectural structures that can unequivocally be called Japanese. The references are not always immediately accounted for but they are not hidden in the images either.

Interestingly enough guidance by the architecture guidebook was soon unnecessary as just by walking through the cities I discovered more and more references unaccounted for in the book. Maybe the viewers of my photographs can understand my surprise to find bricked rail track arches in the center of Tokyo that are built in the same style as those in Berlin, where instead of schnitzel-restaurants you can find noodle soup kitchens.

But why are we so surprised? Again one can point to the experience of Wilhelm Böckmann: Those aspects are usually not shown or told, because most accounts of Japan only go into those aspects that are different from what we know.
The images of the project »Contact Zone« show the mundane. They depict the unspectacular in an unspectacular way. Against the background of European experience the presented urban scenes show no striking features. They become irritating in conjunction with associations to other images known of Japan or previous knowledge about Japan. This irritation possibly raises questions that are not immediately answered within the photographs. Thus the images invite the viewers to take a close look at the details. This project is not necessarily about the things depicted, about tangible references to the world shown. Rather it is about the image *as image* within which various relations arise. There is no central subject matter that attracts all attention. Within the single image various aspects start to unfold their effects mutually, within the entirety of the images they receive another reference framework. Therefore it is crucial that no photograph is more important than another thus they are all presented in the same size. The way the images are presented in an exhibition allows for constructing interconnections between images and for looking at the sequence as a whole.

With the images I do not intend to suggest that Japan looks like this everywhere – or that there are basically no real discrepancies between Japanese and European cultures because Japan has adopted a lot from Europe. Such a claim cannot persist. Still it is worthwhile to point out that Japanese culture for millennia has been absorbing influences from other cultures in a specific way, transforming and integrating them into their own. The European influences from the 19th and 20th centuries therefore only mark a small proportion of what constitutes Japanese society today.

Still these influences mark *that* part of Japanese culture I have moved into the focus of my work, that I devoted my research to, and that affected me to photograph certain locations and leave others out. My own anticipations and, in a way, my perceptions have been generated by the long lasting research into the subject. They are coined by the subject matter just as Wilhelm Böckmann's expectation, bricks were not used as building material in Japan. The mode of anticipation towards the foreign culture certainly plays a crucial role for its perception. The degree of openness towards what one actually encounters in the foreign culture additionally bears on the experience – maybe modifying the experience and altering the results of the observation.

Various Approaches in the Observation of the Cultural Other
As I have been trying to explain, the observation of the cultural Other suggests various approaches: some observers concentrate only on the entirely different and keep to this way of seeing. Others are surprised to find deviations to their own expectations with which they traveled abroad. Lastly there is the possibility of stressing *only* the common ground, completely excluding anything that is different.

While Wilhelm Böckmann is surprised about encountering differences in Japan deviating strongly from his anticipations, the members of the Prussian East-Asia-Mission in the year 1860 hold a view that Japan is the Prussia of East-Asia, therefore everything is absolutely comparable with Prussia. Because they find

parallels in for instance the Japanese virtues of cleanliness, strict orderliness, or accuracy in farming and garden culture they even attest the landscape surrounding Tokyo similarity to the landscape around Berlin – which is untrue. They even compare Japanese tea houses with Berlin roadhouses. They find their positive stereotypes about the downright resemblance verified everywhere and are not even able to morally condemn the so called ›false‹ tea houses, where child prostitution is blossoming as they surely would have done with comparable institutions at home. [cf. Martin: 2002, 91.]

This second anecdote shows how different the perceptions of the cultural Other can be – even within the same time period. But the cultural Other can neither be retained within the Different, nor can it be reduced to mere comparability. Both perspectives miss the Otherness within the respective cultural Other. They do not *represent* the Other, but merely something more or less familiar – as typical similar or typical dissimilar.

If these two perspectives miss the Otherness within the cultural Other: How can »the Other« be grasped at all? The main problem with »the Other« can be sought in the fact that it cannot be clearly named without loosing its meaning as Other – similar to the unknown. According to German philosopher Waldenfels it is necessary to shift the focus of perception: »As long as we ask *what* is the Other, *what* is it *for*, and *where* does it come from, we subordinate it to our previous knowledge and understanding – whether or not we want to.« [Waldenfels1997: 108; translation B.L.] Such an approach inevitably brings forth the attempt to comprehend and explain the Other. As any effort to explain makes the Other loose its specific quality of Otherness Waldenfels suggests something else: »The situation changes, when we abstain from straightly defining the Other and when instead we take the Other as that *whereupon* we answer and inescapably have to answer, thus as challenge, provocation, incentive, call, demand, or however the various shades may read.« [ibid.] The Other thus serves as incentive of debate against which also the familiar is to question because with the Other it gains a center of reference.

Accordingly, any photograph that is trying to define or explain the Other takes away a constituent part of Otherness: its challenge and provocation towards the familiar. Therefore, it seems necessary to keep up this challenge of Otherness within the photographs. The viewers of the images should not only see the Other as deviant from the familiar or just alike *to* the familiar, but they themselves should be confronted with the challenge and provocation of Otherness within the pictures. Thus on the occasion of looking at photographs they can experience Otherness and can take the photographs as incentive to think or discuss about aspects of the Other and the familiar. The photographs themselves serve as a form of disconcertment [Beunruhigung] sometimes irritating about what they show and how this is supposed to be understood.

In order to be able to work with photographs in this way it is important to understand (documentary) photography not as source of mere information – or in philosophical terms – not as a semiotic set of signs referring to the things depicted; but to understand it as a visual means of showing something absent and affecting its viewers in a specific way.

There are two sides taking part in this understanding of photography: The photographer needs to use photography in a way that allows for irritation and disconcertment thus passing down her own encounters with the Other to the viewers. The viewers may form an understanding for the missing explanations within the photographs. They have to find out that it is not a lack of quality when photographs refuse to explain and inform about the cultural Other but that they are supposed *not* to give answers as the viewers themselves are supposed to make up their *own* minds on what there is to see.

The concentration only on the similarity or dissimilarity of the cultural Other presents Otherness in a ›spellbound‹ way. After all there are no more surprises and no stimulations to reflect about the familiar. The incentive, the challenge created by the Other is omitted. The encounter with the Other is in the first place an occasion to become aware of the familiar and to put one's established

tangible beliefs on trial. If we ban this challenge, we will remain within our own limitations.

With my photographs I try to broach the issue of Otherness in a way that does not leave a frozen image of the Other. By irritation about the incomparability of the seemingly similar and the comparability of the assumed dissimilar questions are raised concerning ourselves.

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