Photographing Japan
European Photographers and their Photographic Conception of Japan

In my presentation today I want to start by giving a brief review of the beginning of photography in Japan while also quickly glancing at the creation of visual stereotypes. Relating to the idea of documentary photography I will give a short explanation of my concept of *artistic* documentary photography leading to the presentation of two photographic monographs on Japan by Paul Graham and Elisabeth Neudörfl. In between I will explain a certain use of terminology concerning the perception of foreign cultures relating to photographic approaches to Japan

Early Photography in Japan

When photography is invented in 1839, François Arago, who introduces the new invention of Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre to the French Academy of Sciences, suggests, that it may be used to explore foreign countries, for example, to document foreign cultures and peoples. Immediately the first photographic excursions set out to document mainly archaeological sites in countries surrounding the Mediterranean Sea, as exposure times were too long to easily document any moving objects. But as the 19th century is one of invention, exploration, and imperialism, photographic procedures are permanently improved and soon photographers and photography begin to spread worldwide.

In 1853 Commodore Matthew Perry, envoy of the United States, lands in the Bay of Tokyo and demands the opening of Japanese ports for American vessels. At this time Japan has been in the state of self-imposed isolation for the past 250 years. Since the beginning of the 17th century neither foreigners are allowed to enter Japan, nor Japanese to travel abroad. Sole exception is the Dutch trade mission on the small artificial island of Dejima situated in the bay of Nagasaki that provides for contacts between Europe and Japan. Therefore, at all times Japanese scholars are informed about the European developments and inventions – for instance

within the fields of science and medicine – even during the period of closure.

Commodore Perry is accompanied by the photographer Eliphalet M. Brown Junior, who is the first photographer ever to set foot on Japanese soil. In Japan he takes about 400 daguerreotypes that are unfortunately lost in a fire some years later. Only the etchings that are made after his photographs to illustrate Perry's report, survive. They mainly show various Japanese types in their – for Western eyes – exotic attire and hairstyles, but he also takes photographs of temples and landscapes. Brown's photography marks the beginning of travel photography in Japan as pursued by and for Westerners.

In the second half of the 19th century, following the opening after almost 250 years of national seclusion, many Europeans come to Japan. Weary of the changes in a quickly industrializing Europe many of them are looking for some kind of exotic paradise, that is still untouched by modernization. Unlike other Asian and non-Christian countries Japan for the most part enjoys a very positive reputation in Europe. Japanese virtues are highly admired and in many ways the Japanese seem to be just like Europeans at the other end of the world.

Despite national seclusion knowledge about Japan is widely spread in Europe, accordingly those traveling to Japan expect to encounter certain sights and characteristics they have learned about in advance of their trip. The new medium of photography plays a vital part in the European's exploration of Japan, as it helps to fix the traveler's experience. Soon Europeans open photo studios in treaty ports like Yokohama and Nagasaki, supplying the Europeans with all kinds of imagery about exotic Japan. Major topics are photographs of so called »customs and costumes«, showing Japanese in their indigenous dress or representing Japanese trades, like geta-makers, merchants selling their goods, tea-house waitresses and samurai.

Other topics include temples and shrines, arched bridges and traditional landscapes like Mount Fuji. Often photographers take pictures of sights that have already been pictured in traditional Japanese art before, for example in woodblock prints that become quite popular in Europe in the second half of the 19th century. Europeans love this kind of imagery and it becomes representative of Japan in general. This leads to a standardization of the pictorial representation of Japan. Even though Japan is undergoing deep changes, evolving from a feudal to an industrialized modern society, Europeans tend to overlook these transformations. They prefer to take pictures of wooden houses and people wearing traditional dress, ignoring the increasing presence of Japanese clad in Western clothes and chimneys rising into the sky.

One of the first European photographers opening a studio in Japan is British war photographer Felice Beato. According to German art-historian Claudia Delank Beato »creates a ›visual code‹ of Japan that on the one hand is consistent to the European encyclopedic recording of ›the Other‹ and the yearning for things simple and different, on the other hand it plays a vital role in the imprint of topics and motifs« [Delank: 1996, 283; translation: B.L.]. The two volume album »Photographic Views on Japan« of 1868 sets standards for topics and for a long time serves as a paradigm for photographing Japan.

The photographs are primarily meant for the Western market and satisfy the yearning for a seemingly mysterious Japanese exoticism. »Favored motifs are – then as now – well-known architectures, beautiful scenic locations, things typical Japanese like women in kimono or samurai in armor, the depiction of artistic or artisan activities, and religious ceremonies« [Delank: 2003, 2; translation B.L.].

Whereas Felice Beato in his depictions mainly follows Japanese customs other Western photographers pursue extensive strategies of exotification. The Austrian photographer Baron von Stillfried-Rathenicz, for example,

takes many pictures of barebreasted women taking a bath, combing their hair or fixing their makeup, thus creating an eroticized image of Japanese women that contradicts the traditional code of behavior.

But not only Western photographers support an exotic view on Japan. As exotic photographs are highly in demand, also Japanese studios get in the business of the production of travel photography. Albums are being compiled and exported to Europe and the United States, where they become a big seller at the end of the 19th century. Beginning in the 20th century, private photography starts to supersede professional travel photography, as photographic techniques become very easy to use with new camera types like the Kodak box for example. But private photography is greatly influenced by professional photography as tourists are looking for the spots displayed in the images seen before. Thus the main topics in the photographic depiction of Japan are already set at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century.

Documentary Photography as a Means of Depicting the Other

Early photographers usually were convinced that photography in general was a means of truthfully depicting the world, thus also authentically representing foreign peoples and cultures. Only much later visual culture discourse has proven the idea of photography as an exact copy of the world as wrong.

As it is impossible to review the entire discussion about documentary aspects in photography in this paper, I just shortly want to quote British photo publicist John Tagg who has made some vital contributions in this discourse.

»At every stage, chance effects, purposeful interventions, choices and variations produce meaning, whatever skill is applied and whatever division of labour the process is subject to. This is not the inflection of a prior (though irretrievable) reality, … but the production of a new and specific reality« [Tagg 1988: 3]. The reality of the image may therefore be very

different from the direct perception of reality. The image has so called ›real effects‹ – a term coined by French philosopher Roland Barthes – but it »cannot refer … to a prephotographic reality as to a truth« [ibid.]. Unable to depict reality or some kind of prephotographic truth, the documentary photograph as an image that is truthful and authentic seems to be impossible to achieve. With this notion in mind it is easy to understand that many documentary photographs, including photographs representing foreign cultures, may be stereotyped and biased, not representing the Other in a truthful and objective way at all. This means for the viewers of documentary photography that a photograph shows only *one* way of seeing the world that may be significant only within the photograph itself but not for the world in general.

Accordingly, even the term ›documentary‹ cannot describe truthful photographic approaches to the world. Therefore, it is up to the photographer, by making certain choices, to decide about the image he/she wants to convey to the audience.

As mentioned before, the early Western photographic depictions of Japan follow a certain incentive to focus on aspects that differ from perceptions in the photographers' home countries. Thus the images often show a foreign culture that seems to be exotic and deviant from one's own culture. This approach towards foreign cultures can still be found in today's travel photography as you can see here in some magazine covers on Japan. I dare say that everyone in this room who has not been to Japan yet has an image in mind on how Japan looks and what they expect to see.

The Different and the Other

At this point I want to explain my use of a certain terminology differentiating between »the Different« and »the Other«. 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; translation B.L.]. 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 the person encountering the foreign culture him-/herself has to define his/her own relation towards the other culture using her own cultural background as base of operation.

The use of the two terms ›different‹ and ›other‹ can also be applied to photographic approaches towards Japan. Photographing only those aspects that are deviant from the photographer's own culture to me seems like freezing the foreign culture as different. This approach usually goes along with aspects that are already known and things the audience expects to see in photographs from a certain cultural sphere. The results of this photographic approach can be surveyed in travel- and magazine photography, which is usually concerned with showing things particular or spectacular encountered within a foreign culture. The problem with this kind of photography is, that it does not allow Otherness within the Other, as it is taking part in the manifestation of the foreign culture as different. The question is, however, how photographers can achieve a depiction of the Other without fixing it as different, thus allowing the audience to encounter the Other itself within the pictures.

Artistic Documentary Photography

Before showing some tangible examples for a photographic approach towards Japan that tries not to enhance only deviant aspects I shortly want to reflect upon the difference between a documentary approach that is conceived as travel- or magazine-photography and artistic documentary photography. As mentioned before documentary photography is not able to depict the world in a truthful and authentic way. While there may be some photographers as well as viewers of photographs who still believe in the photographic potential of depicting »the truth«, artists for a long time have learned about their opportunity to use photography as a means of constructing a new reality within photographic images or series. They know very well about documentary photography's shortcoming concerning aspects of authenticity and truth, thus they experiment with photography in a way allowing for the creation of a new visual reality within the photographic series.

To quote German curator Thomas Weski: »If the photographer succeeds in permeating the thing itself with his own means, we know the true promise

of perceiving something that on first glance looks familiar but that – through the photographer's way of seeing – is charged with extended significance; confronting us with an autonomy that we know from the world of visual arts. A photograph of this quality always arouses our interest when its author not only reaffirms our knowledge of reality but creates a difference between his/her perception and our own« [Weski 2003: 23].

Accordingly, the quality of artistic documentary photography lies in the artist's capacity to create a new and individual way of seeing and presenting images that add something new to our knowledge and expectation thus maybe even provoking a process of reflection within the viewers.

The Conceptual Approach

The two art projects I want to present here today are both conceived as conceptual approaches to artistic documentary photography. Documentary photography usually is oriented along the surfaces of the visual. The photographer sees and perceives reality and frames whatever part he/she seems suitable and transforms it into a photographic image. However, the conceptual approach is a little different. In conceptual documentary photography the photographer is not only guided by the surfaces of the visual. Having a concept in mind he/she confronts the world with previously mapped out ideas. Her concept will lead her to visit certain places where she thinks she will find what she is looking for. Therefore her perception of reality is guided by the visual surfaces *in combination* with the concept, which may lead to a perception of reality that may greatly differ from what *there really is to see*. This way of dealing with reality is somehow constructive and this constructivism is furthermore enhanced by the selection of images for the resulting work.

One may say that this is clearly a breach of a supposed open-mindedness that is expected by a documentary photographer. After all, she is supposed

to look at the world and to give a precise depiction of important aspects, thus mediating a condensed sense of *reality* and *truth*. Knowing about the construction of meaning within photographs no photographer can escape from, however, the conceptual approach seems to be much more honest, as it does not suggest to give *the entire picture* but admits the impossibility to convey *the* reality. Having freed herself from the heavy burden of *truth* and *authenticity*, the documentary photographer now may explore the field of her conceptual ideas. With the assumption that this approach may lead to a deeper sense of reality than those approaches that still believe in photography's ability to convey an objective and authentic image of reality, I now want to show the first project.

Paul Graham's »Empty Heaven«

The book »Empty Heaven« by British photographer Paul Graham was published as an exhibition catalogue by the Wolfsburg Art Museum in 1995. Graham, born in 1956, traveled to Japan several times between 1989 and 1995. The book, which is conceived rather as an artist book than as an exhibition catalogue includes 55 color photographs featured either in portrait format on one page or in landscape format on a double page spread. Except for the title, short captions on the photographs in the back of the book, and a short quote from British anthropologist Joy Hendry, there is no explaining text included in the book. A leaflet that comes with the book features an interview with the artist where he reflects upon his intentions in the conception of the work.

The book starts right away with the first image; only after a sequence of five photographs the title is printed on a double page. This first sequence has something of an establishing shot as it introduces the artist's ideas of topics, framing, and editing. I will introduce the photographs in combination with the captions printed in the back of the book. However, Paul Graham deliberately is showing only the photographs without text, aiming at the viewers' interest in the visual quality of the photographs and not in any

intended meaning as it may be perceived from reading the captions.

The first photograph shows the image of a young woman. The flash freezes her in a gesture; she is smiling. She seems to be sitting in a western style room, wearing nice clothes, her face carefully made up. As she is not looking into the camera it is hard to say anything about her personality. Obviously the photographer is not interested in generating a psychological portrait of an individual person, rather he is showing an image that leaves an artificial impression. However, the gesture seems to be natural and the photograph does not look staged.

The next picture is a landscape format showing the engine of a car. Everything is very clean and looks very aesthetic. On close inspection one can find the logo of Toyota. As it is difficult to understand the photograph of an engine right after the portrait of a young woman, there is a possibility to give the image rather a symbolic reading. The Japanese car-industry is very famous and Toyota is one of the most innovative corporations, having initiated changes in industrial production worldwide. In this context the image seems to relate to the economic power of Japanese production.

After turning the page one is confronted with a pink surface spreading over a double page. On close inspection one can see the grid pattern of the print. This is a photograph of »printed pink« as the caption reads. Whereas the photograph of the engine is overflowing with technical details, the pink surface seems rather empty, marking a great contrast. As there is not really much to see, again a metaphorical reading seems to be adequate. Pink is a girlish color, suggesting sweetness and romance. With the Japanese background in mind, it is also the color of cherry blossoms and, additionally, »… a metaphor for the transitory nature of human life. The falling cherry blossom is said to depict both fleeting beauty, and the drops of blood of the samurai, whose life, like beauty, blooms ephemerally.« [Kobayashi: 2002, 63] The reference to the samurai, therefore to war seems at this point a little bit out of place. The combination of sweetness and war in the same

image seems rather trivializing and romantic. Graham seems to play with the double meaning of the symbolism implied.

Turning the page the viewer is confronted with the photograph of a museum wall in the Hiroshima Atomic Bomb Museum, where there are four photographs of the atomic cloud on display. Even though the photograph is in color, it leaves a rather monochrome impression the harshness of which is enhanced by Graham's use of a flash. The aesthetics of the images on display curiously contradict the tragedy associated with the atomic bombs, as they are rather beautiful. This relates to the double-sided perception of the American deployment of the atomic bombs. Without wanting to diminish the suffering caused by the bombings, the atomic bombs have served the Japanese as an occasion for perceiving their role in World War II rather as victims than as aggressors and war criminals at least if perceived from a European perspective.

This photograph is again followed by a very contradicting one. A calendar featuring a photograph of four cute little kittens is attached to a pink wall with a snoopy clip. The kitschy appeal of the calendar motif and the sweetness of the coloring of the wall seem not to go together with the previous image, apart from the fact that there are four kittens in the place of four atomic clouds. Kitsch is a means to withdraw from the harsh reality into a world of a »mock paradise«. In combination the images start to communicate with each other combining the effects of the single images thus gaining deeper levels of meaning.

With this image the introduction ends, it is followed by the title page. The variety of the motifs seems to be very confusing, as the connections are rather vague. However, these five photographs already reveal the photographer's approach.

1. The motifs chosen seem to relate to clichés about Japan as perceived in Europe: i.e.: mysteriously smiling women, cars, kitsch, Hiroshima

2. The objects depicted are always in the center of focus.
3. The photographer closes in on the objects depicted.
4. He always uses a flash.
5. He never shows any scenery.

I think that the way Paul Graham approaches Japan is very special. Using close-ups that are mainly photographed inside, and omitting architecture or landscape it would be easy to dismiss the *Japanese theme*. On the other hand, the imagery he uses is so closely related to stereotypical perceptions of Japan, that it is impossible not to see the relation to Japan depicted in the images.

To elaborate more on Graham's perspective I want to go more into details of his work. As it already shows in the opening section of the book, the editing is very important. Graham does not show single images, but he is using image pairs and sequences. Even when there is only one image on a page, the correlation of the images following each other is mostly visible as shown in the images of the atomic clouds and the following kittens.

Appropriated Imagery

One aspect of the work is the combination of historical with contemporary imagery. This double page spread which follows shortly after the introduction, is a prominent example. The left page features a section out of a manga-image entitled »candy-wrapper« in the caption. The bright pink coloring and the childish girl-characters in combination with colorful hearts and stars leave a very playful impression. This image is contrasted with a section out of an image of a Hiroshima victim whose skin suffered burns in the pattern of the kimono worn at the time of explosion. The color image gives a close-up of the injured shoulder. As it is a close-up reproduction of a printed image, the grid pattern shows. The coloring of both images is rather similar, both feature reddish colors. With the harsh contrast Graham seems to push forward a message of the relation between contemporary

culture and the past. Somehow, the sweet contemporary imagery does not achieve to take away the painful past. The wizard-manga-character, whose magic wand is the central feature of the left-page image, cannot make the past undone. Though in fantasy it can wish for anything thinkable, in reality this is impossible.

Shortly after this pairing in the book there is another confrontation of historic and contemporary imagery. This time the images are both in landscape format, so each is featured on a page spread of its own immediately following each other.

This pair starts with the photograph of a historic oil painting. Graham clearly shows the heavy golden frame and does not suggest any straight reproduction in his framing of the motif. The dark night-scenery depicted in the painting shows a procession of military through the large torii of the Yasukuni-shrine. This image clearly hints on the bonding of shintoism and militarism leading to Japan's role as aggressor in World War II. Knowing that the visits of high political representatives to Yasukuni have become important in Japan's relationship to its Asian neighbors, the image also bears relevance for the contemporary period.

The photograph of the painting is followed by a close-up showing a »toy animal procession« in someone's bathroom. The relation between the two images this time is not established by the composition or coloring, it rather regards the content of the two images, both featuring processions of some kind. The cute little arrangement of toy animals, which can be encountered in similar form in many Japanese households, enhances the distance to the historic image and clearly ties it to the past. However, it shows, that even though the context may have changed, certain elements still link the present to the past.

The choice of the Yasukuni imagery also shows that Graham is not only interested in aspects of the atomic bombs as seen in the previous historic

imagery, but also in questions of Japanese militarism. At this point it also becomes very clear that Graham is using very symbolic and metaphorical pictures to convey something about contemporary Japanese society. Throughout the book Graham uses more of these combinations of found footage image material and contemporary culture. As I can't show all images here, the two combinations shown mark a good example for the use of this kind of imagery.

Portraits

Another important element within »Empty Heaven« is the portraiture of women. As seen the book starts with the photograph of a young woman frozen in a gesture by the light of the flash. In the same manner Graham shows a total of ten portraits of women throughout the book. One that is particularly striking is the first portrait after the title. It is also featured on the book's cover. It shows a woman with a very white face who is raising her hand to her mouth in a gesture that suggests she is trying to cover it. This gesture – significant for Japanese women – in combination with the white face and red lipstick gives a hint that this woman is somehow traditional Japanese. She is dressed well, with nicely styled hair. Like the woman in the first photograph she is not looking into the camera and the moment, enhanced by the light of the flash, seems to be a little strange but not staged. Again the portrait does not show much about the woman's character, it rather gives a superficial impression of someone showing Japanese behavior.

Another example for Graham's way of dealing with portraits of women is a double page spread showing two portraits. Again both women are frozen in mid-gesture, both are not looking in the direction of the viewer. As Graham shows all the women in a way that is very unconventional for portraying people, the element of the gesture gains importance. The primarily young women are displayed without revealing much about their character, though the way of dressing, makeup, and hairstyles suggests different personalities. The manner of depiction, however, seems to emphasize the

gesture, which is something on the surface, perhaps even covering up deeper lying aspects of the individual personality.

The depiction of men somehow contrasts the depiction of the women. Men are only depicted in a very close-up view. They are all shown in profile, often enhancing the style of the frame of the glasses they are wearing. Only one of the men portrayed is without glasses. The men are all older than the women depicted. Graham claims that these are Japanese bureaucrats he encountered in the Tokyo Kasumigaseki district. By photographing them in an interchangeable way Graham seems to relate to the European stereotype of Japanese salary man *(sarariiman)* who supposedly all look alike. However, as he is showing such a close-up view, minute details like skin-texture, moles or eyelashes become important. Therefore it seems that Graham uses the stereotypical idea to initiate a process of reflection within the viewer. By making them – at first glance – all look alike, the viewer is compelled to explore the images more thoroughly and to discover the specific differences between the men photographed.

Artificial Nature

I want to review one more topic within Graham's work: nature. Cherry trees are considered to be a national symbol of Japan. The depiction of blossoming cherry trees is part of the repertoire of Japan photography. Three photographs in portrait format altogether, showing up repeatedly, are entitled »wrapped cherry tree«. They are lit by the light of the flash and thus silhouetted against the night sky. Stems and big branches are wrapped in thick bandages of bast or sackcloth only a few thin branches show. The bandages, that are probably meant to protect from damages, visually transform the trees into someone severely injured that is in need of a long period of convalescence. Despite their sturdiness the trees appear to be weak and needy. In Graham's photographs the cherry trees lack the beauty and dignity that is usually linked to their depiction. Therefore the depiction of the trees forms a contrast to Japanese garden culture that in its arrangement refers to the grandeur of pristine nature. In the photograph it is

night, it is winter and the directness created by the perspective and the use of the flash rejects the admiration of a nature that is highly artificial. With the repetition of this motif Paul Graham emphasizes the significance of the human sphere of influence broadened towards nature.

The topic of the cherry tree is picked up at another location in the book by a single landscape format photograph. This image shows »artificial cherry blossoms« that are fastened to real branches by wire. This photograph refers to an experience withheld from the audience in the cherry tree pictures. Due to the flash the blossoms make a very three-dimensional appearance. A reversal of naturalness and artificiality takes place. While the *real* cherry trees appear to be far away from nature, in this photograph a rather natural impression arises that is, however, broken by the use of the brightening flash. Only on close inspection the viewer notices the wire that fastens the blossoms to the branches. Still the photograph is far away from being kitschy. The ambivalence between nature and artificiality is directly accentuated. The cherry blossom in plastic looses its ephemeral delicateness. Not perishableness but permanence and robustness come to the fore. The toughness that stands out in the photographs of the wrapped cherry trees is carried forward in the photograph of the artificial cherry blossoms. While the real cherry trees seem to be sick and injured this picture demonstrates stability. Thus a discrepancy is created between the depictions themselves and the further associations the viewers may have.

Appraisal

The various sections I have presented form only a small part of the book. Unfortunately I can't give a more thorough presentation here, still I have touched some of the major aspects of Paul Graham's approach. The photographer closes in on the objects and people photographed, dissociating them from their environment and enhancing their surfaces by the use of the flash. Even though the objects are in the center of attention, questions concerning the depicted remain open. The things depicted remain fragments but due to the method of grouping, sequencing, and

repetition of the photographs a certain impression and threads of meaning are created in the overall view. By combining contrasting imagery that seems not to match on first glance, further layers of meaning are created. The images are not self-explanatory but the visuality provided allows for rich opportunities of discoveries. Visual richness and openness invite the onlookers to a thorough viewing and allow moreover for associations in various directions.

The photographs are not fully self-explanatory. The viewers are challenged to make up their own minds of what there is to see. There is, of course, the layer of meaning, that draws attention to certain symbols that can be read out if the knowledge about them is present in the viewers' minds. But even without knowing about the symbolism implied the images have an *impact* on the viewers. It is not absolutely necessary to understand the deeper meaning of the images or their symbolism: this additional knowledge may add a new layer of understanding that can complete the impression on the whole. However the photographer completely trusts his images to create a certain atmosphere that can be perceived by the audience. By sequencing the photographs in a very dense way the images start to affect the viewers, maybe releasing a process of reflection upon Japan or Japan's otherness.

In using photographs in a dual way, one concerning the impact photography can have on the audience, the other implying metaphorical or symbolical meaning, Graham is able to include many aspects that are regularly not touched by photographic projects about Japan. Thus, even though he is relating to typical or even stereotypical representations, in my opinion Graham achieves a very untypical and new way of seeing and showing Japan.

The photographs often take up elements of Japanese culture that are known in the West. Sometimes the selection of motifs seems to be almost stereotypical. But instead of approving popular clichés Graham's

photographs seem to be sowing the seeds of doubt about them. The surfaces may hide something pointing beyond the stereotypes. By inserting a quote of cultural anthropologist Joy Hendry between the images and the captions Graham hints towards this way of looking at his photographs: »The West is overly concerned with ›unwrapping,‹ with revealing the essence of things. We should look rather at the method of concealment…« To look at the method of concealment can hint to the nature of the things hidden according to Hendry. This is where Graham starts. His photographs show surfaces opening the opportunity to start reflecting about the things underneath.

Photography is usually used for showing things that can be seen by the naked eye. However, by combining images that leave out certain spots, that create aspects of emptiness and raise questions they cannot answer themselves depth may be created that cannot be found just by looking at the world. By opening a gap between the popular image of Japan and his pictures, by challenging our expectations, and taking their disappointment into account, Graham creates a unique view of Japan.

To me it seems that Graham does not want to explain what Japan looks like or show how it is to be there. Rather his images raise questions that they do not answer thus questioning our own ideas, conceptions, and perceptions of Japan. In this way the viewers of Paul Graham's photographs gain the opportunity to confront themselves with aspects of a foreign culture participating in the author's experience of the Other. Japanese culture is not presented as frozen in difference but as something that is challenging us, motivating us to perceive Japan in a different way: As the Other that cannot be explained just as the deviant from our own culture.

Elisabeth Neudörfl's »Future World«

Elisabeth Neudörfl is a German photographer born in 1968. She photographed most of the book »Future World« on the occasion of a four

months residency in Japan in 1998 and returned the next year to finish the project. The artist's book »Future World« was published along with her solo exhibition at the Sprengel Museum Hanover in 2002. The book shows 80 black and white photographs in portrait format only, featuring two different sizes. Portraits are always printed in the whole page format, whereas scenery is printed with a white frame throughout the book. The interior of the book does not feature any text, the imprint is hidden in the fold-out covers. As the book is conceived to be used in Western and Japanese ways, it has a Western and a Japanese title and also two imprints in German and in Japanese. Therefore there are two different ways of looking at the book, starting from the Western or the Japanese beginning. As the exhibition was never shown in Japan it is clear that it was the artist's concept to integrate a Japanese and Western way of seeing within the layout.

Neudörfl's photographs – except for the portraits – are taken from a certain distance. While Graham's images usually focus on the center of attention, Neudörfl's photographs don't always show a central aspect. They are themselves like a scenery that can be viewed in their complex visuality. The images are very open and casual thus some viewers may have problems to find meaning in them.

Neudörfl touches various aspects of Japanese contemporary culture. Her main focus, even though it is nowhere explicitly stated, is security and protection. It is possible to interpret the images in this way, but they may be seen in alternative ways as well. No metaphorical reading of the images seems to be intended, the images rather present dense visuality within the photographic frame. The audience may in the first place look at the images to see what they show.

Most of the images stand on a single page for themselves, only on a few double-page-spreads two photographs are directly confronted. However,

the editing suggests, that Neudörfl is working with sequences within the book, even though they are rather meandering thus maintaining an openness. The portraits have a different format than those photographs showing the scenery. As they are interspersed within the book, they serve as structuring elements that help to group sequences covering specific aspects. However, they cannot be viewed as divides for closed chapters.

Japanese Introductory Sequence

I will start by showing the introductory sequence from the Japanese beginning of the book. The first image is taken from a viewpoint above ground, looking at a residential neighborhood. A narrow street is leading straight into the photograph framed by telephone poles. On the right hand side in the back we can see an office building that is a little higher than the other buildings. In the far distance there seems to be an urban housing estate. The photograph shows a mundane setting of a quiet urban neighborhood. There is nothing particular about the photograph – it shows an everyday view of a nice – mainly residential – area.

The next photograph, again from above, shows another neighborhood, which is built more densely than the one in the previous image. On the right hand corner there are two tiny figures that are cleaning a yard. In the middle of the photograph houses are huddled along a narrow street, which they are blocking from view. Further in the background there are rather large storage houses and far in the background there are cranes that suggest a port area. There is also the ramp of a large bridge. All of this has a very day-to-day appeal. This image shows – compared to the previous one – a more densely built urban setting. For the European viewer the closeness of residential and commercial zones within the city may seem a little bit strange.

Also the next image is taken from an elevated position. The trees standing along a small street leading almost straight into the picture are concealing most of the street's sidewalk. On the right hand side a lower lying street is

covered by a grate, on the left hand side there is some kind of urban waste land covered by greens. Attention getter of the photograph is an office building of about 15 floors in the left part of the image. In the background there is a system of stacked freeways on different levels and more nondescript architecture. In the lower third of the image's right hand side a small figure is standing in front of the guard railing of the small street. On the sidewalk we discover a squatting person taking a picture of the first one. The photograph shows an urban border situation. The transition between dense construction and urban waste land appears to be quite abrupt, the existence of the waste land area seems to be somehow strange in this otherwise densely constructed area. Especially irritating, however, is the situation of the two figures taking a tourist picture in an urban non-space. The situation is left completely open; the backdrop of the tourist photograph remains hidden from our view. The image does not have a central object that is defining its topic. It refers to various aspects without purposefully aiming at a certain interpretation.

The fourth photograph shows the steel skeleton of a 12-floor building's construction site. Photographed from street level the sturdy looking steel construction fits seamlessly in the urban environment. The vertical is enhanced by the tapering lines and the view upwards. The unfinished state of the structure refers to the potential of transformation within an ever changing metropolis. The motif remains – once again – indefinite, as it is for example not clear if the resulting architecture will be an apartment building, an office building or a parking garage. Just as it is impossible to have an idea of the appearance of the finished building by looking at the interior structure, also Neudörfl's photographs keep an openness that is rather ambivalent, therefore allowing different associations.

The last photograph of the introductory sequence shows a high-rise building with a very monotonous façade as seen from the ground. It consists of squares, each of which has a square window in the middle. This

colossus is evocative of a big-brother world where individuality appears not to be acceptable. The image is rather depressing: the image space is completely filled by the uninspired architectural structure and the only greenery at the left bottom of the image has a rather dark appeal to it. This photograph is followed by one of the portraits; therefore the sequence is interrupted at this point.

The introductory sequence shows a change in atmosphere within the urban settlement. All images are perceived from a day-to-day perspective, but the rather friendly atmosphere in the first picture is replaced by a cumulative gloominess. The topic in this sequence seems to be touching aspects of urban density. It is very hard to talk about the images though, as there is nothing particular or striking about them. They seemingly don't show any beautiful scenery, they don't show interesting architecture. They seem to be simply banal. And still, for the European viewers, on close inspection, they show aspects that cannot be encountered in a European setting. The contained quietness of the photographs leaves room for associations by the audience. But the photographer expects from her viewers the patience to look closely and to think for themselves.

The aspect of security does not show clearly in this introductory sequence, however, there are elements to be found. One is the idea of self-assurance by taking a picture of each other in a certain place. Even though Neudörfl doesn't show us the backdrop of the scenery, the tourists are reassuring their presence at a certain location that bears meaning to them. The density of urban dwellings can be read as an idea of safety within highly populated areas. The human may feel sound and safe surrounded by other human beings, therefore seeking urban dwellings rather than the lonesomeness of the countryside. This is only one idea of a possible reading one may agree or disagree with. The ambivalence of each individual photograph allows for a variety of different ways of viewing them. It is also possible to just indulge in the atmosphere of the photographs.

Condensed City

The compaction of urban space is one of the recurring topics in the book »Future World«. These images show – among other things – how different transport routes are separated and how this separation exerts influence on the structuring of urban space. Neudörfl's photographs of the urban concentrate rather on structural than on architectural elements within the city.

On the small street in the foreground a woman is leaving the image space on the right hand side, her back turned towards the viewer. Elevated train tracks are roofing over the driveway marked by a zebra crossing. Strong steel beams tie the rail construction to the ground. Traffic lights, in Japan arranged horizontally, traffic signs, and power lines are only some of the details seen. The photograph is very complex. Despite the densification depicted the photograph appears to be wide on the ground level as neither sidewalk nor street are heavily used at the moment of exposure. The picture shows the maximum utilization of urban space on different layers whereby it looks very structured. The layers of street and railway form horizontal lines to be broken by the vertical supporting structure. The photograph itself concentrates on the depiction of a highly fragmented space that is why the tangible elements lose their importance within the picture.

The lower third of the following picture is defined by three rows of flower boxes made out of plastic. If the flowers are natural or artificial cannot be clearly detected. The arrangement, situated at the side of a street closed off by bollards, is designed in a loving way. Above this construction an elevated street crosses the scene whose supporting structure is lying outside of the photographic frame. The guard rail of the elevated street enables the view on the rooftops of vans and other vehicles. The differentiation of space is accentuated in various layers. The rows of flower boxes combined with street and road barriers mediate depth of space, the elevated street forms an upper boundary thus reducing the impression of

height. The arrangement of flower boxes underneath an elevated street appears to be rather strange. This little – supposedly artificial – biotope seems to be roofed by the upper street and therefore sheltered. As the traffic is moving on the upper level, also the lower street is literally pacified.

In this context the concept of ›wrapping‹ in Japanese culture becomes significant which was developed by British anthropologist Joy Hendry in a book with the title »Wrapping Culture« – we already know her from the quote in Paul Graham's book. Wrapping is casing, packaging. This phenomenon is regularly discussed within the discourse of Japanese gift wrapping culture that ascribes importance to the way of packaging. But Hendry extends the concept of wrapping to other areas of Japanese culture and society. In her concept wrapping can be read as a system of layering. She also applies this paradigm to space, which, according to her, can also be wrapped. Architecture therefore serves as a structuring encasement of space. It arranges space and defines the proportions that coin the individual experience of (urban) space. So also at this point wrapping is just as significant as that what is wrapped. Anthropologist Hendry therefore assigns a protecting function to the system of wrapping.

Security

Where the structuring of space serves as a form of protection the question of security in general is quite close at hand. Thus I want to introduce some photographs that can be linked to this topic. The situation shown in this photograph is on first glance hard to classify. In the center of the image six men are standing in a group turning their backs to the onlookers. On their heads they are wearing strange padded hoods. They are standing insecurely as if the ground was shaking. The photograph conveys a rather strange impression. As the protagonists turn their backs towards the audience their actions remain ambiguous. The resulting irritation is purposefully used by the photographer. The photograph stands alone, neither the previous nor the following images in the book present any

explanation on what there is to see. Knowing that this photograph is taken in a center for earthquake simulation it can be ascribed to a certain topic. However, the ambiguousness about the visual aspects in this picture persists.

On a broad gravel driveway two black luxury limousines are parked behind each other in some distance in the center of the picture. Between the two cars are standing three men in suits, two of them looking in the direction of the camera, the third can only be seen from behind. On the right hand side further away from the limousines a fourth man is talking on his phone, turning his back towards the group. Even though the situation is rather unspecific and the faces can barely be identified due to the great distance one reckons to know such a situation from numerous movies. The picture triggers direct associations to the Japanese mafia, the Yakuza. We automatically categorize the men as dangerous. Neudörfl systematically uses the reference to well-established visuals. She needs only one photograph to initiate an entire chain of associations thus referring to the sufficiently known practices of the Yakuza and the threat they pose to law and order. The distance kept by the photographer to the men categorized as dangerous serves as safety margin and thus enhances the effect of the photograph. The photographer as well as the audience can catch a glimpse from afar but they remain in a respectful distance thus in a safe place.

Right beside the modern coach a woman is standing frontally to the onlooker. The way she is dressed in a uniform and her posture identify her easily as a tour guide. She is holding a piece of paper in her hands. Her glance is directed past the viewers to something that is happening outside of the photographic frame. The person of the tour guide mediates great safety. She embodies the want for safely traveling in a group many Japanese prefer to exploring the world individually. The photographer decided not show the group that is following the tour guide but to point to the figure of the tour guide herself. Thus the audience is challenged to individually fill in the gap.

These photographs touch aspects of security and need for protection in a subtle way. The author refrains from evaluating the situations shown. The viewers have to make up their own minds on how to view the images. It is not meditated how we should understand the world depicted.

Groups

Already the photograph of the tour guide refers to one of the common Japanese stereotypes: group behavior. This topic is covered in some more pictures within the book two of which I want to present here.

A group of six girls is standing densely packed and almost circular in a vast empty parking lot. The girls are talking with each other seemingly waiting for something, which is hinted at by the figure standing on the left looking at something outside the photograph. All of them are wearing school uniforms. Especially remarkable is the bodily closeness held by the group despite the space available. Layering of space and graphical elements within the photograph highlight the homogeneity of the group additionally enhanced by the school uniforms. The physical closeness supplies the girls with the protection of togetherness.

The photograph shows a very special kind of group behavior mediating some kind of otherness. It is put in the picture in such a subtle way that it is not made explicit if the behavior is foreign and therefore specifically Japanese or if a similar behavior could be encountered in Europe as well.

Another photograph takes up the topic of group behavior in the context of school activities. On a stony hilltop at a small Shinto-sanctuary there is a large group of students. They are wearing identical sport suits. As in the other picture they are standing together quite closely. However, this time this is related to the limited space at hand. The distance held towards the group deliberately neglects any traces of individuality thus accentuating the homogeneity of the group. This photograph once again matches the concept of security and protection observed by Elisabeth Neudörfl. The

identical clothing enables the assignment of individuals to the group. At this size of the group the supervisors probably don't know every single student but the uniform certifies their affiliation thus offering protection.

Neudörfl's photographs show that in Japan group behavior and safety are immediately related. The combination of the two concepts allows for a different assessment of the commonly rather negatively viewed Japanese group behavior. Missing individuality can also be read as a means of protection within groups of various sizes.

Portraits

Neudörfl not only photographs scenery and groups of people she encounters in public space. One part of her work consists of portraits she has taken in rather close-up situations. There are 18 portraits altogether that are spread out through the book. They mark a great contrast to the other images as the photographer closes in on the individual person, completely filling the photograph with the head. The background is pushed back even further by the use of the flash. The people photographed are mostly young and they do not look into the camera therefore the viewers' attention is mainly drawn to their facial features. The onlookers therefore become observers and not partners of the people photographed. The people depicted are busy in a way that cannot be read out of the pictures. They seem to be listening intently, some are also talking.

The first portrait I want to introduce as an example shows a woman in a slight perspective from above. She has pushed her dark hair in medium length from her forehead. At the right margin of the photograph her hand holding a cigarette is rigorously cut. The view from above and the lids partly covering the eyes the direction of her view cannot be clearly detected. Because we are not able to see her eyes completely the impression of her in the image is rather austere, uncommunicative, and repellent. She remains in her own world and does not give anything away.

This portrait leaves a completely different impression. A very young woman is photographed in semi-profile from the right. Her straight black hair is fixed by girlish bobby pins, her bangs slightly move into her forehead. Her lips are pursed because she seems to talk at this instant. She is gesturing with her hands that can be seen in the lower left corner slightly cut by the photograph's margin. Her open gaze leads directly out of the image on the left hand side. She seems to be friendly, curious, and open-minded.

Both of the young women leave completely differing impressions in the photographs. Not only due to clothing and accessories but also mimics and gesture distinctions are created enhancing the difference between the two personalities. However, the photographs reject the notion of individuality of the persons depicted and draw no fixable conclusion on their characters.

The last portrait I want to show here shows a middle-aged man. He is photographed from a position slightly above; his eyes seem to be closed or his gaze is lowered in a way that his eyes cannot be seen. Due to the invisible eyes and his age this image seems to fall out of the series of portraits as the other protagonists are much younger. However, Neudörfl includes this picture in the book. Through the aesthetic congruence of the photograph's situation this portrait can be seen as an extension of the group of people photographed: Even though the photographer is showing mainly young people she does not intend on concentrating only on this age group.

The portraits within the book »Future World« suggest closeness to the people depicted. However, they remain reserved as the portraits are telling only little about their personalities. On the one hand they show immediate presence, on the other hand they don't give anything away. The image remains image and withdraws from an intellectual and therefore textual understanding. The viewers are confronted with an impression that seems to be impossible to be put in words. The portraits undertake no attribution.

They show average Japanese without fastening them to a certain social role. Also their ethnicity remains indetermined, at least it is not enhanced in any way. The facial features are in the center maybe initiating a search for individual characteristics that – no matter what – remain nondescript. The people photographed are visible as individuals without delivering insight into their character or personality. Even though the situation of the photographs is in a way uniform differences of the people portrayed are unfolded much more intensely than an individualized portray situation would have allowed. Without decidedly aiming at a characterization within the portray situation the photographs show multitudinous facets of the group. The integration of various age groups further enhances the diversity.

Appraisal

Of course there is much more to »Future World« than I could possibly introduce in my paper. However, I have tried to touch some basic aspects within Elisabeth Neudörfl's photographic approach. Her photographs supply a rather withdrawn view of Japan. Anything spectacular, important sights, stereotypical views remain unconsidered enhancing the mundane. The photographs show specific Japanese aspects, deviant elements to Western culture can be discovered. These facets are interlaced into the series in such a subtle way that they may be overlooked on a superficial glance. Those viewers who are willing to engage themselves at length may discover quite a few details.

Elisabeth Neudörfl's way of working is much more vague than Paul Graham's. Her photographs do not necessarily uncover her intentions. In their complexity, in their succession, and in the combinations they offer the opportunity to conceive an image of contemporary Japan. The photographs do not assess what they show. The viewers obtain the possibility to make up their own minds. However, Neudörfl's photographs are closely observed and selected. Her conceptual approach draws near the foreign culture through the topic of security and protection. The images retain great

openness they are passing on to the viewers. In this way it is possible to encounter the Other as Other by means of looking at the photographs.

This is the point where Neudörfl's and Graham's works resemble each other even though formally they are very different. »Empty Heaven« somehow seems to be much more constructed, much more direct as the photographs always show a central element. In »Future World« it is very difficult to make out a central aspect in the pictures. Both works aim to the impression they leave on the viewers. They want the viewers to firstly concentrate on the visual quality of the image that does not exclusively point to the things depicted. A visuality is created within the photographs themselves. Thus they do not try to depict some kind of otherness but form a means to encounter the other.

Photographing Otherness

At this point I want to return once again to the terms introduced earlier, »the different« and »the other«. I have tried to argue that Graham and Neudörfl are looking for a way of depicting Japan that does not freeze Japan as deviant from European societies and cultures.

The main problem with depicting »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 Bernhard 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.« [Waldenfels 1997: 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.

Bringing Waldenfels' idea of the Other as provocation, challenge or incentive together with the photographs of Paul Graham and Elisabeth

Neudörfl I think it may be better understood what I am trying to reach here. Neither Graham's nor Neudörfl's photographs give answers to certain questions one may have about Japanese culture. The photographs may answer a few while leaving many more unanswered. Also, they refuse to be read in a straight way, thus remaining in a state of abeyance, confronting the viewers with a situation they may encounter themselves when traveling to Japan.

[>>]
Thank you.

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