

## **"Uniqueness" in Japanese Art Photography: Toward Situating Images in Context**

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All nations assert cultural difference through contrast with other countries, and Japan is no exception. However, the country believes it is extraordinarily unique, and has built pervasive cultural myths that claim uniqueness to anything Japanese. Could "uniqueness" in Japanese art photography be one of those myths?

In his excellent article "Distinctiveness versus Universality: Reconsidering *New Japanese Photography*," art historian Yoshiaki Kai critically examines a 1974 exhibition held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York that introduced the works of fifteen Japanese photographers to an international audience.<sup>1</sup> The event, named "New Japanese Photography," was groundbreaking. According to Kai, Japanese photographers had been quite apathetic about trying to obtain recognition abroad and they seemed comfortable with the status acquired within the local photography community.

Kai explains that "New Japanese Photography" generated mixed reviews from critics; some of them found the images imitative of American photography. Others could not help but notice how the exhibition closely resembled the photographs that had been shown at MOMA during the previous decade. In addition, the organizers John Szarkowski—at the time director of MOMA's Department of Photography—and Shoji Yamagishi, then editor of the photography magazine *Camera Mainichi*, appear to have had differing views. Szarkowski referred to the emergence of a "distinctively Japanese photography" in postwar Japan, a style that departed from the former tradition of pictorialism. Yamagishi felt differently. He wrote,

I did not intend to propose the idiosyncrasy of the Japanese style of photography, based on the contrast between the West and Japan. Rather, for me, it was a part of habitual work that seeks out the common significance of today's photography, based on contemporary concerns and unrestricted ideas.<sup>2</sup>

These contrasting views raise the question of whether there is, or has ever been, a distinctive style of Japanese photography. Is there something unique in the photographs produced in Japan before or after WWII? Have Japanese photographers constructed images of the world around them in a novel way?

Since its arrival in Japan in the 1840s, the camera as a tool in the production of meaning has been embedded in the traumatic processes that have characterized Japanese history: rapid modernization and industrialization, internal social exploitation, imperialist enterprises, atomic bombings, and natural and man-made disasters. Photography was introduced to the Japanese archipelago by the Dutch in Nagasaki, before the country was forced in 1853-1854 by Commodore Perry's expeditions to enter into trade with the United States.<sup>3</sup> After an uncertain start, the production of photographs in Japan sped up from the late 1850s, thanks to advances in technology and the establishment of the

first two professional photo studios in 1862. This combination of circumstances allowed the camera to play a role in the representation of a feudal society in transition right before the 1868 Meiji Restoration.

Art photography in Japan emerged slightly late compared to Europe, during the first few years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and it was indebted both technically and aesthetically to Western influences. Given that photography in Japan was initially part of a larger scientific and aesthetic movement in the West, it is worth considering whether photography was affected by a “native” Japanese way of seeing. Photo historian and curator Kaneko Ryuichi argues that from the 1890s Japanese art photography took its own course, making it essentially different from art photography in the West.<sup>4</sup> Japanese art photographers concentrated on a few key themes: calm images of nature, misty landscapes that conveyed lyricism and the romantic beauty of the mountains and the countryside. This trend, palpable by the 1920s, led some Japanese photographers to feel there was something “essentially” Japanese in their way of seeing. However, the photographers who tried to convey a sense of Japaneseness were often educated abroad and had distinctive European aesthetic influences.

I argue that attributing *uniqueness* to Japanese photography, whether from a research or a spectator point of view, is problematic. Although Japanese photographers did not just passively reproduce foreign themes, their ways of seeing developed vis-à-vis scientific and aesthetic modes of seeing in the West. This happened in a dialogic manner: Japanese photographs both informed and were informed by non-Japanese texts. Historian John Dower, for instance, is distrustful of the idea that native art traditions affected Japanese ways of seeing in prewar photography. He argues,

One might have expected the photographer’s eye to be influenced by the dynamic sense of composition and line that distinguished woodblock prints- and even more, by the disciplined use of form and emptiness in the great tradition of *sumi-e*, or ink painting. (...) The earliest Japanese photographers appear to have been uninfluenced by these traditional ways of seeing. (...) It was not until the vogue of “art photography” began around the turn of the century that Japanese photographers found inspiration in paintings, an even then such inspiration often come from contemporary Western painting rather than from traditional Japanese art.<sup>5</sup>

In this line of thought, art historian Eric Shiner places contemporary Japanese photography in a broader context, and he sees it as the product of multiple influences taking place in a global network:

Simply stated, for the past one hundred years, Japan has been infiltrated with images and essays from around the world, something that has helped alter the way things are seen and understood. In other words, Japanese artists work within a truly global network of ideas and images, and are just as likely to look abroad for ideas as they are to reference Japan’s own unique history.<sup>6</sup>

The global network of connections influencing Japanese photography appears most clear today. In an era of globalization, photographic narratives are the complex product of multiple national and transnational influences. The widespread circulation and consumption of digital images add to this complexity. Photographers are continually exposed to these images through

the internet and social media. This affects the way artists understand their own images, and further blurs the thin line separating “Japanese” (art) photography from other genres. To provide an example from my fieldwork research on art photography of the Fukushima nuclear disaster: a young Japanese art photographer may consider him or herself part of the domestic photography community simply because he/she is connected to dozens of other Japanese photographers through Facebook. This virtual community may be aware of the members’ exhibitions and projects, and validation comes not only from showing their works at art galleries in Japan but also from recognition abroad. Often, these photographers make a living from commercial photography, advertising, and various photographic assignments for newspapers and magazines. Thus, photographic genres frequently mix, and photographic discourses converse with a multiplicity of global influences.

That is not to say that there is no authenticity in Japanese photography. Certainly one can find personal style in the photos of Daido Moriyama or Nobuyoshi Araki as well as many photographers in Japan today. However, that authenticity is not related to a supposedly “Japanese” way of seeing but rather to the creativity of individual artists and their *mannerisms*, as Kai points out in “Distinctiveness versus Universality.”

It is well-known that Japan has a history of producing and reproducing state narratives which emphasize the *uniqueness* of Japan’s culture, its land, and its people—the so-called theories of Japaneseness or *Nihonjinron*. This explains why arguments for the uniqueness of anything Japanese resonate in Japan. But when analyzed in detail, theories of *Nihonjinron* do not account for more than myths, since traits supposedly unique to Japan—such as national character—can be found elsewhere.

We need to abandon the filter of uniqueness when looking at Japanese photographs if we are to gain a deeper understanding of the images. By paying attention to the social dimension of photography as well as the influence of individual artists, we are able to go beyond essentializing dichotomies that only reproduce cultural myths.

More than thirty years ago, Allan Sekula wrote, “The meaning of a photograph, like that of any other identity, is inevitably subject to cultural definition. The task here is to define and engage critically something we might call the ‘photographic discourse.’”<sup>7</sup> It is in this realm of social exchange of information where photographs make sense and are made sense. Pressing the shutter button may be an individual action but photography is primarily a social activity, one that is inevitably tendentious (as all communication is). Photographs function as *texts* that converse with a multiplicity of other texts.

There is no “uniqueness” in Japanese photography. There are unique photographic acts—each photographic act is unique because it can only take place once. To be interpreted, Japanese photographs need to be placed in the larger sociopolitical and historical context. Only then we can get a sense of the tension and conflict that characterizes photographic discourses.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Yoshiaki Kai, "Distinctiveness versus Universality: Reconsidering *New Japanese Photography*," *Trans Asia Photography Review* 3.2 (Spring 2013), accessed March 1, 2015, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tap/7977573.0003.203/--distinctiveness-versus-universality-reconsidering-new?rgn=main;view=fulltext>.
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.
- <sup>3</sup> John W. Dower, *A Century of Japanese Photography* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).
- <sup>4</sup> Kaneko Ruichi, "The Origins and Development of Japanese Photography," in *The History of Japanese Photography*, ed. Anne Tucker (Houston: The Museum of Fine Arts, 2003).
- <sup>5</sup> John W. Dower, *A Century of Japanese Photography*, 5.
- <sup>6</sup> Eric C. Shiner, "Focus and Cross: Thoughts on the Changing Face of Japanese Contemporary Photography," in *The Meaning of Photography*, ed. Robin Kelsey and Blake Stimson (Williamstown, Mass.: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2008), 188.
- <sup>7</sup> Allan Sekula, "On the Invention of Photographic Meaning," in *Thinking Photography*, ed. Victor Burgin (London: MacMillan, 1982), 84.

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