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By Marina Grzinic

Marina Grzinic looks at a selection of recent photography from Japan

The body of the city of Osaka is constructed from layers of fakes, simulations of Western Europe's architecture and shopping streets running alongside North America's kitsch amusement parks. All these fakes stand cheek by jowl in its city spaces, overlapping the blending into one another, without borders or edges. Fakes next to fakes: the French Eiffel Tower, the American Statue of Liberty, surrounded by models of American suburban housing. The fakes fill the traumatic voids of Osaka's real space - the one without public zones.

Two art projects - The Osaka Loop Line project (O.L.L.p.) and The End of the New Town project - cut through these voids in Osaka, questioning the architectural and urban planning of the city and its surroundings: The Osaka Loop Line project, which deconstructed Osaka inside the territory of the Osaka Loop Line and was developed by a project team led by the young artist Manabu Miki and The End of The New Town, a project by Midori Komatsubara, who perceives it as a dislocation of Osaka from the outside.

Both projects were first presented as part of the Art in Residence project (AIR) at the Inter Medium Institute Graduate School in Osaka (IMI) under the title 'Scanning Osaka' and were carried out in December 1997. 'Scanning Osaka' has been developed through the work of a broader IMI-AIR research group that, besides Komatsubara and Miki, involved a team of near to twenty artists, students, organisers and foreign lecturers from Ljubljana, Amsterdam, London and elsewhere. 'Scanning Osaka' was a synchronous and diachronic, sharp and precise cut through Osaka's history and memory. Both of its projects dealt with the important issue of detecting and reinterpreting those monuments and buildings which obscure or simply (re)present dualities - of full-empty, social-psychological and real-virtual spaces. 'Scanning Osaka' questioned the concept of public space as a highly political topos, content and form.

The O.L.L.p. tried to detect how select objects and monuments in the city of Osaka are connected to its political and economic power. These objects and monuments were presented in a series of photographs, always displayed in pairs. The photographic pairs established interactions and possibly dangerous connections - dualities of meaning, in the spaces and monuments of the city. Exposed in their double photographic view, each of these sites refers to the so-called 'dislocated counterpart'. The pairs also articulate different subject-viewer positions. Firstly, the proximity and distance allow the viewer to move constantly from one photograph to the other - move into it and out of it. Secondly, the photographs try to seduce the viewer into falling into the multiple points of view that the work itself is proposing.

Midori Komatsubara's project The End of the New Town is a precise presentation of the structures of the Japanese new towns which were built around historical cities in Japan, showing that the structure of the new towns resembles that of the new cemeteries. On the one hand, new cemeteries are today regulated as 'towns', on the other, the ageing populations of the new town communities function like well organised cemeteries. The social voids of the new towns mirror the loss of memories and the completely dispersed and alienated human structures in the new town enclaves.

The end of the new town ghost model can therefore lead, as Komatsubara has shown, to a new articulation of memory and history. Her project has more to do with the codes and identities that are infused and expressed in these landscapes and urban structures, and less with reductive sociological

analyses. Neither a total reality, nor a total fantasy, her pursuit of memory and loss is tinted with amusing ritualistic features.

Komatsubara and Miki show, once again, that good old photography (from its conceptual tradition represented by Bernd and Hilla Becher, to Chihiro Minato's persuasive and obsessive searching for the detail as signifier, etc.) can still carry ambiguous and insightful ideas on different levels. Their projects can also be aligned to those tendencies in contemporary art which try to define public and/or private space in art and society. (Wasn't this the topic of the 1997 Documenta in Kassel?)

This kind of interrogation of the signs and rituals of space, to counter cultural hegemony, is also a part of Masaki Hirano's two photographic series presented under the title *Down the Road of Life*. The first series, *Habaneros*, taken from 1992-1995, prompts us to rethink the ways Cuba is (un)masked for the foreign, not just the Japanese gaze. The second, *Holes*, was taken mainly in Sarajevo in the years 1996 and 1997.

We can start the story of Masaki Hirano's representations of Cuba with his portrait of a family of six sitting in the living room. We are aware that Fidel Castro is another family member in this picture. Hirano depicts a society, but nothing in his photographs stigmatises or frightens us. All we see here is pure reflexivity with some disturbances; no shocks. Castro forms part of the family portrait by virtue of the coincidence of him being on TV exactly at the moment Hirano took the picture. Let's think about this photograph as a portrait which combines the coded poses and smiles of the family with the uncoded figure of Castro. He is a cut, an additional detail in the photograph - a detail that Roland Barthes called the 'punctum'. This detail is what I added through my interpretation but, according to Barthes, it is also what is already there.

Cuba, with its anachronistic thirst for the bizarre, the cruel (the masses of poor bodies in the sun), the terrible (the lustrous unfunctional cars) and the fashionable (home hairdressing) is the land of paradox and incommensurability. Cuba can be depicted as either a model or a monster, depending on which position we view the system from. Some of Hirano's photographs, in Barthes' terms, constitute the very raw material of ethnological knowledge. We are caught by the testimony of his photographs which are full of social, anthropological and historical meanings.

Masaki Hirano's photographs are not the sort of photographs which shock the viewer: there is too much of the performance about them. What is important is the kind of Otherness produced by the Cubans themselves. This is already an integral part of the photographs' setting - in fact, it plays a vital part in constructing it. The subjects of Hirano's photographs are fully cognisant of this. In the process of taking a pose, in the process of putting themselves into the image, they constitute themselves in front of the lense. This posing is especially apparent when the Cubans are pictured in front of the big and wasteful cars. The myth of the huge American car, of the ruined buildings, of the liminal bodies, families, and so on, make Hirano, as Barthes would say, a mythologist of - let's write this as simply as possible - the Cubans' communist reality in the 90s. To portray the war is always a difficult task; we can say that every war is a substitute for, a sign of, the War. But when the photographer tries to take another path, as Hirano has in his *Holes* series, to reinvent the structure of the photo, which will not represent but articulate the war through an image, this is difficulty of another order. Every hole within the frame is a depiction of some horrible reality, destiny, and simultaneously a hole with its own material weight. As Hirano's work shows clearly, the horror and trauma of the war can also function as a screen, a surface, a structure itself, whose fascinating effect conceals something more horrible than horror; the void of feelings, of emotions of those who survived the war in Sarajevo. The coloured photo surfaces are like membranes, rhythmically pulsating, but at the point when the gaze of the spectator comes across the hole, there is no resemblance: only the void remains.

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