

Rinko Kawauchi

Imperfect Photographs

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ABSTRACT:

I analyze the oeuvre of contemporary Japanese photographer Rinko Kawauchi through the notion of *imperfection*. An approach that gives precedence to process over product and combines conceptual art with vernacular traditions makes her pictures happily imperfect. Departing from Kawauchi's transmedial concept of the image, often lying between word and image and mainly materialized through photo books, I propose that Kawauchi's photographs are imperfect thanks to her experimentation with technical mistakes, the vernacular subject-matter of everyday snapshots, seriality, sequencing, and format variation, elliptical visibility, the aesthetics of color, and a non-linear temporality. Imperfection emphasizes the materiality of the medium, and positions photography far removed from the referent-centered documentary domain by way of *aisthethic*, rather than semiotic, significance. Imperfection also activates reception as it kindles emotional involvement and participant viewing.

RESUMO:

Analiso a obra da fotógrafa contemporânea japonesa Rinko Kawauchi partindo da noção de *imperfeição*. Uma abordagem que dá precedência ao processo ao invés de a dar ao produto, e que combina arte conceptual com tradições vernaculares, revela as imagens de Kawauchi como felizmente imperfeitas. Partindo da concepção transmedial que a fotógrafa faz da imagem, localizando-se amiúde entre palavra e imagem e materializada sobretudo através de livros de fotografia, proponho que as fotografias de Kawauchi são imperfeitas devido a elementos como: experimentação em torno de erros técnicos, motivos vernaculares da estética *snapshot*, serialidade, sequencialidade, e variação ao nível dos formatos, visibilidade elíptica, a estética da cor, e temporalidade não-linear. A imperfeição enfatiza a materialidade do *medium* e posiciona a fotografia longe do domínio documental, mais centrado no referente, por via de uma significação *aisthética* ao invés de semiótica. A imperfeição também activa a recepção, promovendo um envolvimento emocional e um olhar participativo.

KEYWORDS:

appresentation; conceptual art; error; materiality; photobook; vernacular photography

PALAVRAS-CHAVE:

“appresentation”; arte conceptual; erro; fotografia vernacular; livro de fotografia; materialidade

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The oeuvre of contemporary Japanese photographer Rinko Kawauchi is wrought with imperfection. An approach that favours process over product and combines conceptual art with vernacular traditions makes her pictures happily imperfect. Kawauchi's image universe, an aesthetics that has been aptly called a "poetics of the everyday", is intimate with the world of vernacular, deskilled photography and amateur errors or technical imperfections. Throughout Kawauchi's multifarious experiments in iconicity — encompassing analogue and digital technology, video installation, blogging, slide shows, and, above all, photo books — the notion that a work is an irreversible process ending in a static icon-object fails. Nothing her works offer is perfect, complete, and defined. All is inclusive, expansive, and hypnotically open-ended.

Her oeuvre, in its entirety, is work-in-progress. Kawauchi's project *The River Embraced Me* (2016) materialized her concept of the image in a feat of reverse-engineering that took both the exhibition and book form.¹ Images are transmedial, here spiralling between word and image, but not culminating, for consummation will not describe any work of Kawauchi. Take the title of one of her works from 2013: *4%* evokes the theory that only this tiny percentage of the mass of the universe can be perceived; it acknowledges the impossibility of imagining a perfectly complete picture. Infinity for Kawauchi starts with the endlessness of configuration of the elements at hand in the editing of the image. Thanks to the arrangement in sequences of unexpected variation, photography appears as a never-ending process in which the mode of binding is the mode of loosening.

Kawauchi's photographs are radically without frame. Boundary-less images, regularly bound in books, laid out, juxtaposed in a syntax of continuity (itself a form of imperfection), decidedly against linearity, fixed contours, and stable contexts. For Kawauchi, "[p]hotography is a process of continuous choosing", in which "choosing a photograph from the contact sheet is as important as pressing the shutter release button" (Ishida, 2012: 125). Factor in a grammar just as imperfect as her syntax. These photos speak patois and rhyme without much reason.

Photobooks are Kawauchi's cardinal form of producing her emphatically imperfect photographs. Especially in the case of Japan, the dissemination of photographs in book form is more significant and far-reaching than showing photography in galleries. Looking back at the socio-critical history of photography, its beginnings also appear fuelled by photobooks.² "Medium" in the modernist, Greenbergian sense fails to provide an adequate description of photography and its variations, in particular, through Kawauchi's photo pages; that is, "medium" in the sense of a form produced by specific technical means with specific expressive possibilities.

Just as medium-specificity gives way to transmedial photography, photobooks instantiate photography's principle capacity to exist in varying copies and with multiple authors, photographer, printer, designer. Books *qua* photographic apparatus contest an all-too-typical notion of photography and photographs as the

¹The exhibition was first shown at the Contemporary Art Museum, Kumamoto, from 23 January to 27 March 2016.

²I am of course referring to Walter Benjamin's 1931 essay (Benjamin, 1977) and Gisèle Freund's book from 1936 (Freund, 1936).

single and perfect products of an individual photographer. Recall the signature “decisive moment” that defined Henri Cartier-Bresson’s masterpieces — the formal peak in which all compositional elements in the photographic frame align for the perfect image — it thrives on such a conception of photography.³

Kawauchi’s photobooks come in all shapes and sizes. Some books are hybrid in terms of mixed media, like *The Eyes, the Ears* (Kawauchi, 2005b) coupling word with image; others in larger composition terms. *Gift* (Kawauchi, 2014) consists of twin volumes. It takes the syntax of facing pages to facing-books-level in order to display Kawauchi’s collaboration with Terri Weifenbach. *Approaching Whiteness* (Kawauchi, 2013b) is an exquisite take on the Japanese scroll. It offers a single-themed variation on contact-sheet images very much at odds with *Sheets* (Kawauchi, 2013c). The latter is a book that adds gatefolds to the contact-sheet mimicry, adequately conveyed by black paper and a lower reproduction quality. As the perspective shifts from ultra-distant to a close-up mosaic through layout variation, it invites us to look again, look closer, and further.

Ametsuchi (2012) deserves special mention because it was the first project that Kawauchi originally shot for an exhibition. The work, consisting of seventeen large-scale photographs and a video, is a site-specific project pivoting on the *yakihata* or controlled burning of farming fields that ritually takes place in Aso, Japan. *Ametsuchi* was given new life when Dutch designer Hans Gremmen did the book version (Kawauchi, 2013a). This beautifully manufactured book gave Gremmen principality on a par with the artist and the editor, Aperture Foundation’s book publisher Lesley A. Martin. For Gremmen, “[t]he book itself — the way it is printed and bound — asks questions about the medium of the book, and how people tend to use them” (Sholis, 2013). The book is done in a variation of origami or “Japanese binding”. We slide through it; a feeling of continuity arises through the uncut pages (the sides and bottom part of the page are open, only the top is closed). Moreover, the book has a parallel series of negative images on the inside of the pages. We find images — not all, only the pictures of ritual burning and of starry skies — printed in inverted colours, maroon, blue dashes of purple. The design of the book plays out opposites (rough paper on one side, smooth on the other) that seem to translate the meaning of “Heaven and Earth” of *Ametsuchi*; it sets a game of repetition and inversion across images and typography alike (the Rinko Kawauchi name and the title of the book appear at both beginning and end, the image on the endpapers repeats, as does the typography, on the hardcover, with Kawauchi’s name printed upside down).

Without exception, Kawauchi’s books are reshuffle-ready, typically unpaginated, and singularly adept at non-linear narratives. They unfold a certain continuum of time, rather than present individual moments. Isolating a photograph, in fact, is a rather forceful move for the sake of exemplarity. Kawauchi’s minimal unit is the tandem, not the single photograph.

³ The English translation of the original French publication — Henri Cartier-Bresson, *Images à la sauvette* (1952a) — was chosen by Cartier-Bresson’s publisher Simon & Schuster as the title of the 1952 American version, and unintentionally imposed the motto which would define Cartier-Bresson’s work. It is present in the epigraph to Henri Cartier-Bresson’s introductory text, a quote by Cardinal de Retz: “There is nothing in this world which does not have its decisive moment” (Cartier-Bresson, 1952b).

In addition to chronological priority (Kawauchi produced hand-made photobooks before her publishing debut in 2001, with the three volumes *Utanane*, *Hanabi*, and *Hanako*), the books have epistemic weight (Kawauchi, 2001a; 2001b; Kawauchi and Takei, 2001). The dominant pairing design has the book layout as matrix, and syncopation for rhyme. While traceable with some insistence, the morphological analogy of pairs is always a bit off, especially compared to the solemn geometry of any New Objectivity series, for example, Renger-Patzsch's *Die Welt ist schön* (Renger-Patzsch, 1928). The effect of her juxtapositions is anything but sobering. "Seeing two images next to each other opens up the imagination and gives birth to something else", declared Kawauchi upon the international release of *Illuminance* in 2011 (Goto, 2011).

The epistemics of colour are key for such dynamics of formation on the fringe of decomposition, pulsing between *Gestaltung* and *Entstaltung*.⁴ Colour is unstable — Bauhaus guru Josef Albers warned no normal eye was foolproof against the "colour deception" of the after-image or "simultaneous contrast" phenomenon (cf. Ishida, 2012: 126) — and colour has the potential to produce multi-sensorial episodes through its vibrating boundaries (Albers, 2009: 23). Rather than taking colour as deceptive, Kawauchi relishes in the plurality of perspectives: "I love those ever-changing colours. It can be a metaphor of how the world can transform completely just by looking at it from different angles" (Ishida, 2012: 125).

Consider the vertigo of flowers spiralling in white, mauve, and magenta paired with a seething blue maelstrom, appearing in *Illuminance*. Compare this also to the iconic picture of the man jumping across the puddle where every element in the frame appears perfectly mirrored thanks to his projecting shadow — Cartier-Bresson's "Behind the Gare St Lazare". For a description of Kawauchi's vertiginous ensemble, no characterization could be less appropriate than "the decisive moment" that defines the legendary snapshot, once and for all. Kawauchi offers not marvels of exactness but a galaxy of stills following the fluid nature of colours and producing a *metamorphography* blurring every fixed contour. The instability of colour harbours the beauty of transfiguration. Perhaps that explains why eggs and hatchlings are a favourite subject of hers, as are butterflies, mutation's winged reminder.

Flipping through the pages of her photobooks "gives birth to something else"; it sets in motion a cinematic, hallucinatory presence. What Kawauchi's imperfect photographs make visible is as important as what is not manifest, yet can, in principle, be perceived. Her work is an invitation not to look at some stationary object but to "watch" photographs unfold as we negotiate their signification, even their referent. Her snapshots contain not a slice of time but a thrust of infinity.

The temporality of photobooks has been consistently appreciated as closer to cinematic time and motion. The advent of digital technology has smoothed the continuity between photo and film. Filming with a digital camera is now standard practice, and has turned quite a few photographers into filmmakers, Kawauchi included. Yet the rapport predates digitalism. Photobooks have a particular temporality: neither the decisive moment of a single photo nor cinema's flow of time.

⁴ For Walter Benjamin, colour was the "Medium aller Veränderungen". See Benjamin, 1985a; 1985b.

Slide shows are another photographic form that we will find in Kawauchi, similarly imbued with such “photofilmic” dynamics.⁵ Still and still moving, throughout her photobooks, materiality marries cinematic illusion.

Photobooks are objects thick with materiality that call for manipulation. Unlike an image hung or cast, the book grants us private viewing with plenty of opportunities to linger, to stretch time. Duration fosters the occurrence of metamorphic colour phenomena. On the other hand, the book format is perhaps more prescriptive than that of the exhibition.

If transmediality does not detract from materiality, even less does imperfection. On the contrary, the emphatically imperfect photographs of Kawauchi further advance the materiality of the medium. Ultimately, her imperfect photography amounts to a production of presence, of a presence-effect. But this presence does not refer to the privileged relation of copy and original (“there was referent X”) that haunts the discourse of the medium. It is a presence felt, evoked, but not shown. Such evoked presence corrodes the fantasy of an external world independent of the perceiving subject, and undermines the idea of photography as a medium that offers evidence or irrevocable proof of existence by that which appears recorded in the recording device; in a word, that eliminates subjectivity. Kawauchi’s imperfect photography, an image universe tensed between materiality and illusion, is a world not without humans.

Kawauchi’s “poetics of the everyday” has the insignificant as dominant subject matter. With the exception of *Cui Cui* (2005a), her photographs are mostly, uncannily, de-peopled. A bestiary of insects, flowers, children, food, cooked and uncooked, intertwining the urban jungle and the natural world, yield the cosmic in minuscule detail. Her use of a pastel palette and hazy focus blending fore- and background augments the subtlety of the motifs. Delicate fragments form and dissolve into a kaleidoscope of the quotidian. Only in *Ametsuchi* (2012) did Kawauchi drift to an altogether extraordinary planet.

Kawauchi’s “everyday existentialism” has been described as a naïve, amateur, offhand, dilettantish, dream-like, elliptical, fractured, speculative, vernacular, de-aestheticized approach.⁶ Her photographs are serene yet disquieting, de-peopled yet full of “mistakes”. Technical imperfections come forth. Deficient flashlight, a water-splashed lens, magenta-stained images recur — all of them wounds of procedure.

Imperfection must be defined in relation to history — technological and social, that is, cultural — and the set of conventions that shape a repertoire of “error” in order to advance concrete transformations of error’s function and definition. With Kawauchi’s, at the same time that the photobook format renders her photos present, her aesthetics conjures presence in the age of digital content. Kawauchi’s endeavours have been chiefly analogue as well as contemporary to glitch art, that is, an artistic hacking of sorts that exploits methods to make digital images appear pixelated and thematizes colour blotches or interruptions of figures — a practice for obtaining mutant images. Like many digitally generated works through the manipulation of

⁵ See Cohen and Streitberger, 2016.

⁶ See for example David Chandler’s “Weightless Light” (Kawauchi and Chandler, 2011); Lange, 2010; Loh, 2012; Stremme, 2005; Robertson, 2014.

encoding and compression, Kawauchi's experiments show ways to wake up the latent image, part by chance, part under strict aesthetic control, in her medium of choice.

This roughly sketched present landscape speaks to the post-metaphysical "material turn" of media theory, which has informed media studies progressively since the 1980s (Rautzenberg, 2009). The material turn (also, "performance turn" or, alternatively, "aestheticization") can be justifiably read as a cultural reaction to the promotion of radical absence that an iconophobic tradition has promoted, such as the simulation theory put forth by Jean Baudrillard. Palpable is the love for images in recent *aesthetic* theory, as in the image-making practices including blemishes that reveal material processes while also encouraging viewers to interact with images.

Graphic avatars of imperfection are pregnant with time. They are laden with anteriority and futurity. They evince their own having been made and anticipate their own degradation. When Kawauchi does not get rid of the trace that signals the moment of picture-taking, the temporary status of the image gets uncovered at once. Moreover, imperfections arouse a communion of feelings in the viewer's present. David Freedberg would say that we experience an "embodied simulation" that kindles empathy, if we can extrapolate the artist's physical gesture in the modulations of paint and sculpt material to photographic images, and spark the *feels-as-if* (Freedberg and Gallese, 2007).

Errors, rather than the infallible photographer, evoke a presence that touches us. We see a round shoulder occupying the right-hand corner of the dysphoric arena as the bullfighting team drags out the bull. "I don't consider any shot a mistake", Kawauchi tells us (Ishida, 2012: 126). Photography will not, at any given point, be perfect. Perfection promotes distance, reverence, awe. To the extent that we are conscious of the form in a work of art, we become somewhat detached. Aberration, on the contrary, kindles unpostponed emotional involvement. A trembling pulse can move us; an unevenly lit night shot, too. We let down our guard in the face of the magenta-stained image of the waterfalls. Kawauchi's photos embrace the accident, and we embrace them.

Roland Barthes employed similar Brechtian terms to find fault with the "overconstructedness" of horror presented in "Shock Photos", an essay collected in his 1957 *Mythologies*. The gruesome pictures of political realities on display at Orsay Gallery earned Barthes' distancing disapproval because, "the photographer has left us nothing" but "synthetic nourishment" thanks to "the perfect legibility of the scene":

Now, none of these photographs, all too skillful, touches us. This is because, as we look at them, we are in each case dispossessed of our judgment; someone has shuddered for us, reflected for us, judged for us; the photographer has left us nothing — except a simple right of intellectual acquiescence: we are linked to these images only by a technical interest; overindicated by the artist himself, for us they have no history, we can no longer *invent* our own reception of this synthetic nourishment, already perfectly assimilated by its creator.⁷ (Barthes, 1997: 71)

⁷ Cf. Barthes, 2005: 98: "Or, aucune de ces photographies, trop habiles, ne nous atteint. C'est qu'en face d'elles, nous sommes chaque fois dépossédés de notre jugement: on a frémi pour nous, on a réfléchi pour nous, on a jugé pour nous; le photographe ne nous a rien laissé — qu'un simple droit d'acquiescement intellectuel: nous ne sommes liés à ces images que par un intérêt technique; chargées de surindication par

Very much in contrast to these fraudulent “shock photos”, Kawauchi will leave us plenty to invent upon reception. Her photographs, far from “overindicated”, engage with an elliptical visibility that calls for participant viewing. Less sensory detail requires more perceptive completion. Contemplate, for instance, the shattered glass from the *AILA* (2004) series turn magically back into the coffeemaker as our mind’s eye intervenes in the reconstruction.⁸ The object is evoked, not shown. Non-linearity takes the form of an indirectly constituted object, at once given and withheld.

With such an indirect object, the intensity is cognitive rather than perceptual. Kawauchi lulls us with the art of searching. The instance of reception is decisive for her photography, as if the viewer added the finishing touches to the picture. The viewer must, however, not conceive such finishing as final. Each context grants renewal. The insignificant form returns and recharges in tireless combinations. The elliptical and insignificant quality itself is key for negotiating both signification and referent. Oblique angles, flattened perspective, overflows of striated morphology, and curious little bits magnify with their imprecision the fact that no definition, a specific image even less, could determine Kawauchi’s work. Her unsutured images precede and follow as seamlessly as the myriad colours that diamonds cast also in her book’s pages. Its title, *Illuminance* (a term referring to the amount of luminous flux per unit area), is perhaps more scientific but less fitting than the “rainbow-like play of lustrous colours” (Ishida, 2012: 126) of *iridescence* when it comes to Kawauchi’s work.

Kawauchi’s images are gently disorienting. They are at the same time transparent and opaque. Just as syntax is montage in lingo, “appresentation” is the phenomenological equivalent of connotation.⁹ The phenomenon of grasping something over and above what is perceived is defined with the name of “appresentation” in Edmund Husserl’s *Logical Investigations* as the co-presenting not actually given yet produced in perception. As appresentation presupposes a core of presentation, it is a co-presence that is in the spatial field, which Markus Rautzenberg cleverly analogized to connotation. Denotation is the first meaning of a thing, what jumps to one’s face, and connotation its inseparable decanting, the meaning at the corner of the eye. Just as connotation and denotation are indivisible aspects of a thing’s meaning, every perception simultaneously presents and appresents.

Kawauchi is the doyenne of appresentation. Her artfulness is the antipode of overconstructedness; it is charged by the laconic, implicit semantics of connotation. Kawauchi’s strategy exploits and strips bare the mechanics of signification or, which

l’artiste lui-même, elles n’ont pour nous aucune histoire, nous ne pouvons plus inventer notre propre accueil à cette nourriture synthétique, déjà parfaitement assimilé par son créateur”.

⁸ Excerpts from *AILA* (Kawauchi, 2004), including the image in question, can be found on the artist’s website < <http://rinkokawauchi.com/en/works/253/>> (accessed 20 August 2022).

⁹ I am indebted to Markus Rautzenberg for his insights in many writings and his input on an early version of this article presented at “Visual Noise: Wandering Artefacts and Aberrant Images” conference at the ICI Berlin, 17 June 2016, organized by Clara Masnatta, in collaboration with Banu Karaca and James Burton <<https://doi.org/10.25620/e160617>>. The analogy and reference to appresentation is from Edmund Husserl, *Logische Untersuchungen* as quoted by Markus Rautzenberg (2014: 351).

is the same, perception. A figure needs a ground, that is, the immediately surrounding space that frames it and enables the very act of perception. Contexts help decode and co-produce meaning. This is the minimalist approach that flourishes along Kawauchi's parallel reframing. For shades of meaning, Kawauchi is an entire sentimental education.

Over and over, Kawauchi calls forth the hidden sides of a thing that we may not sensuously perceive, but of which we are aware. Her photos pulse between the unseen and the visible, with a non-linear beat. They teach us at once: the stuff that images are made of is not visual. It is temporality that enables the non-manifestation of the image (soon-to-be-unfolded) and the tacit presence insisting throughout Kawauchi's work.

Selections from Kawauchi's portfolio get mixed and remixed in a number of projects. While imperfection spins in the shape of impermanence and recurrence, an image's return seems always fresh and the image renewed thanks to the elliptical visibility at play in the photographic sequences of her books. On the whole, it feels that it is through the choreography of many iterations and associations that we get to uncover things, as we see the varying images dancing on the page. One particular example is the variation on the pincushion full of colourful pins that links *Cui Cui* (2005a), Kawauchi's take on the family album, with *Semear* (2007). Originally commissioned by the Museum of Modern Art of São Paulo, *Semear* was to portray the local community of Nikkei immigrants. The pincushion, spotted with hindsight, makes us feel that we are looking at extended family in this later project. Subliminal patterns of such kind (or kin) abound.

In Kawauchi's ceaseless work-in-progress, we never know where the images are going. More often than not, her images do not show where they are coming from. "Every time I make a book, I leave out many elements that indicate a certain location", she clarifies (Ishida, 2012: 125). A camera can be a geodesic instrument, a compass of sorts; Kawauchi's camera is a magnetic machine at times at the threshold of discernibility. Against all photogrammetry, it produces topographies of sensibility by downplaying the charting impulse in the oscillation of the two poles of the medium, *semiosis* and *aisthesis*.

In his book on "Japan", *L'Empire des signes* [The Empire of Signs], Roland Barthes showed that the opacity of signifiers of the system he called "Japan", in other words, a loss in mediatic transparency entailed a gain in *aesthetic* significance. Kawauchi's body of photography with wounds of procedure gives way to materiality with an emphasis on *aisthesis* that is, too, in detriment of the documentary: not "This was X" but rather "Look at this!" Yet the pointing-at is done not with the index but with the little finger. She usually employs a 6x6 medium-format Rolleiflex that gives the child-like perspective: one can typically see the floor in the lower part of the frame. From the perspective of the adult eye, from higher up, this generates a sense of incompleteness, and the mind's eye steps into the breach.

While not really documentary, Kawauchi's style is perhaps in fact diaristic, all snap annotations. If narration is time in textual dress, her work is indeed lyrical, but not elegiac, and never epic. What best describes Kawauchi's art is the interplay of polarities: unhackneyed clichés, all given at once withheld, serene yet disquieting, prosaic poetics, intimate and domestic but also worldly and universal. As her work

oscillates between poles (including, but not limited to *aisthesis* and *semiosis*), we are unable to pin it down. But we come to be certain about the given fragility of a state. Nowhere are these dynamics and the surge of materiality more visible than in her engagement with colour.

The rainbow-likeness describing the shape-shifting iridescence of her work can be misleading. On the one hand, Kawauchi's photography is properly atmospheric. We are at times genuinely immersed in her luminous chromatic expanse. An environmental concept as *Stimmung* — “the relationship we entertain with our environment” for Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (2014: xi) — chimes with this photography of enveloping feelings. A subtle presence is imparted in the multi-sensorial chromatics of this damp photography full of dense, evaporating light. Images conjure an estrangement comparable to observing life through the glass of an aquarium. It puts us in a mood, like “the lightest touch that occurs when the material world surrounding us affects the surface of our bodies” that Gumbrecht specified for *Stimmung* (Gumbrecht, 2014: x).

On the other hand, Kawauchi's palette is restricted to aquamarine greens, blues, maroons, and thoroughly white-splashed. The waxy pastel quality of her pictures produces a coated proximity that allows us to penetrate things with our gaze but also keeps us a coat away from them. Her palette, for Kawauchi, is a way of seeing the world as “half awake and half asleep” (Ishida, 2012: 127). But is the world that we see opaque or semi-transparent?

Kawauchi's pictures are bright with opacity. A reference to Goethe's theory of colours is in order. Not only because Goethe's *Farbenlehre*, his colour study, is based on perception and engages whole-heartedly with questions of psychology and sensitivity (to him we owe the confirmation that there is no *Bild* without *Gestaltung*, no picture without consciousness). Above all, we must refer to Goethe because his notion of white is not the absence of colour, but a pure drop of opaque transparency. *To wit*, “[t]he highest turbidity is white, the simplest, brightest, first, opaque occupation of space” (“Die vollendete Trübe ist das Weiße, die gleichgültigste, hellste, erste, undurchsichtige Raumerfüllung” (Goethe, 1989: 67).

A certain thickness is congenital in whiteness. Thickness slows down the reading of the image; it is troubling. Sometimes shades of white can take over, like the picture of the little albino spider against the corrugated plaster. Other times, white hues can bring dulcification to the riot of colour of a carnival scene. Very often, Kawauchi achieves the pastel quality of her pictures by aiming the lens directly at light sources. But there is more to her white expanses than overexposure. Floods of light bring to her images an “occupation of space” in particular through the recurring reflections. Reflections are the contagion of two bodies; they give us a being-in-space. The immediate inscription in space that these reflections offer is purposely turned away from the recognizable. White, again, is for *aisthesis*.

More often than glass, water appears as Kawauchi's chosen reflective medium. Perhaps because, as everyone knows, meditation and water are wedded forever, the aquatic medium percolates effortlessly into Kawauchi's “everyday existentialism”. The *Search for the Sun* (2015) series brings aquatic and photographic media nicely

together.¹⁰ In this series, shot in Austria, Kawauchi's cerulean palette goes glacier; her aquamarine turns to ice. The crystal blue of this most controlled palette gives the impression of containing natural history, something to be treasured like the moth fossilized in amber.

Reflections emphasize the fact that the image is an illusion that is embedded in a physical object. This also brings us to the realization that photographing involves physical presences in the world. Incidentally, Kawauchi has expressed her preference for arranging her exhibitions as collaborating with space, for the "wall to look like a large reflection of light" (Ishida, 2012: 127). Augmenting, in this way, the illusion integral to images suggests that the physicality of images is perhaps not best deployed in art shows. It is for sure tangible in the vernacular understanding of photography.

No other work of Kawauchi's is closer to the vernacular tradition than *Cui Cui* (2015), which represents 13 years of day-to-day living picture-taking. *Cui Cui* is a variation on the family album narrative, produced as a slide show and in book form. Because the former is between the banal familial and avant-garde mode of presentation, the projected images combine the vernacular with the conceptual more poignantly. As the slides follow one another against electro-acoustic accompaniment intermixed with chirping (*cui-cui* is an onomatopoeitic French word for the sound of birds), flashing first white and leaving a *turbidus* after-image in our retina, we slowly come to realize that the image carousel focuses on Kawauchi's own family.

The grandparents are protagonists in this project. The family gets together for dinner, the grandmother cooks in the kitchen, harvests vegetables in the garden, a pregnant woman's belly, scenes of a marriage, the funeral procession, the grandfather reappears, breastfeeding close-up, and so on. Not only do we get here the vernacular photo par excellence — the wedding picture — together with the impression that culinary shots (behold every kidney bean shining back at us like flash-lit eyes) have been part of photodemotics in Japan long before Instagram made food a universal genre. We also come to appreciate photography as a vital part of the domestic architecture; a picture we flipped by can casually appear framed in a room. A photograph is a physical presence in the world. As image-object, it invites physical as well as visual engagement.

Kawauchi's variation on the family album articulates an ecology of images that is in open conversation with how we experience photography as a social and cultural phenomenon. Or, which is the same, photography as snapshots. The simplicity of the composition of snapshots encodes their highly conventional character and reveals that they are artefacts for memory and affect. Snapshots, according to Catherine Zuromskis, are defined by aesthetic simplicity and a certain rhetoric of authenticity; the snapshot's truth is the truth of feelings (Zuromskis, 2013). A snapshot image is typically drained of its meaning the minute it is contemplated outside its personal frame of reference, Zuromskis remarked, for this move neutralizes the affective charge that defines it next to the simplicity of

¹⁰ The *Search for the Sun* series was shot for the exhibition *Rinko Kawauchi Illuminance* (20 March to 15 July 2015 at Kunst Haus Wien, Austria). Cf. the artist's website <<http://rinkokawauchi.com/en/works/126/>> (accessed 20 August 2021).

composition. The snapshot truth-content gets expanded to all images in Kawauchi's serial framework. The genre's constitutive affective charge is rooted in the physicality of the photograph, itself a memory device.

Perhaps the greatest insight into these vernacular workings is the framed photograph of Kawauchi's grandfather carried high by the mourning procession. We are seeing but the ancient talisman of sacred presence as fetishized gadget, the life-like effigy of a dead man in the age of technical reproducibility. This photo will equally grace his tomb, or hold a place of honour in an homage dinner; it is a portable monument.

Snapshots and *Cui Cui* alike feed on authenticity and affect, yet the latter engages in such rhetoric with a distance. Empathy is mediated through the constructed presentation of a cyclical narrative far removed from linear temporality. The challenge of continuing after we see the grandfather's corpse and funeral is well sustained through the remaining one-third of the photo-narrative. As the old man reappears, we realize these are rebirths, not resuscitations. *Cui Cui* is really a book on the season-like cycle of birth, growth, death, and the rituals that make up life. The naive immediacy with the personal of the amateur dissolves with the universal.

It is true that documenting and constructing go hand in hand in the snapshooting tradition. Yet Kawauchi's emphasis is on the constructing by way of documenting. Amateur photography and Kawauchi's snaps' paths part as they pave their ways. While Kawauchi's *aesthetic* errors were in detriment of the documentary, the frequent technical imperfections in snapshots testify to their documentary concerns irrespective of (in the modernist sense) the aesthetic, against which amateur aberrations stand. Kawauchi's imagination stands in a third place that is neither the deskilled vernacular nor the aesthetics of high modernism. Her work is at odds with the art paradigm that Barthes upheld before the shock photos, in spite of the opportune comparison. As Ariella Azoulay pointed out, behind Barthes's critique stood an idea of art coterminous with the new (Azoulay, 2008:163-64). Barthes was unable to shudder before the shock photos because the artist (really any other one) had done this before him. Barthes' cool leaked over aesthetics in the wider sense, that is, perception, sensation, (not) feeling again a feeling that is not new. Against resolution and for reiteration, Kawauchi's work is, in this respect, as well, a sentimental education.

If snapshots are fundamentally true, their truth got reverse-engineered with a particular project of Kawauchi. Commissioned by the Museum of Contemporary Art of Kumamoto, *The River Embraced Me* (2016) introduced engineering between word and image to re-turn to the community present in vernacular photography. Yet the return was not so manifest. *The River Embraced Me* is an uncannily de-peopled representation of community. Their exposure is done in written words, not fixed in images. Words and the logic of performance compounded the programme of this tellingly conceptual work giving precedence to process over product.

For the project, the community of Kumamoto was called upon to submit their stories and memories of a place in the region, indicating the corresponding location. Thirty-one memory stories were selected, that is, the best-written ones were chosen, and Kawauchi set off to the places indicated in these stories to make photographs in a shooting "comparable to a pilgrimage", as curator Haruko Tomisawa put it

(Kawauchi, 2016). She pressed the shutter release when something, anything really, from a story resonated in her in the place (reportedly, references to weather, the seasons, and time abounded). Kawauchi was a distant medium. In addition, Kawauchi produced a poem, an *exquisite corps* of sorts, by extracting lines from each story. One became the title of the project, “the river embraced me”. At the exhibition, Kawauchi’s photographs and the extracted texts were shown side by side, under strict aesthetic control. Also on display were the six sample stories that the Museum made as model for the participation call.

Now, nothing of the process that I am describing is visible in the photographs. To grasp that *The River Embraced Me* is a work of process over product one must read the explanatory text that comes as booklet insert or *separata* with the photobook. Distance gets physically inscribed in the book with this caesura. In fact, words and images here appeared coupled and divorced to a varying extent. While the book kept the site-specific character, the exhibition did not, and included a selection of Kawauchi’s previous, more scattered projects (*Utatane*, *Illuminance*, and *Ametsuchi*). The exhibited images were likewise sequenced in an order different than in the book variant.

Just as the images in *Cui Cui* were far from being snapshots on their own vernacular terms, the photographs of *The River Embraced Me* were, too. The pictures encompass interpersonal intimacies and communities in an unconventional way; they are “someone’s memory place”. The stress falls not on the proximal, but the distant. At the centre lies an absence that is at odds with the sacred presence that came to appear in her earlier project. Still, these images are pregnant with emotions, memories, and the words that conveyed them before mutating like butterflies at the photographer’s hands. *The River Embraced Me* cultivates the intensity of the indirect object — in the shape of an ekphrasis in reverse.

But the reversal was not straightforward, or, rather, the substance was not stable and then merely evaporated and condensed. The solicited memory text was a script that eventually was performed in “visiting someone’s place”. The artist retraced movements, thoughts. Her steps’ echo in the landscape’s architecture of remembrance unleashed the emotions that the memories had recorded. Mimicry and re-enactment mechanics came in play together with involuntary memory in a distorted “madeleine effect”. Reverberation triggered Kawauchi’s own memories; these partially overlapped the recalled fragments, and so — reportedly, at least in the photographer’s inner chamber— appeared the images doubly exposed.

This ambitious search was not for a definite kind of temporality, but for time itself: “Rivers can be a metaphor for time itself, and I want the exhibition to be a place to feel the flow of time”, said Kawauchi (Kawauchi, 2016). The convertibility of past memories into the present of re-enactment, and the certain future drift of these photographs in works to come anchored *The River Embraced Me* far away from the documentary and its preterite.

All along the transmutation *The River Embraced Me* capitalizes on the in-between. It is between one’s memory and someone else’s capturing, between text and image, that is, between media, and between the lines of the text, in the interlinear and the interstitial. The call for room to recall and air to imagine is not new to this project. Now we breathed the air in between the lines of the multivocal poem; we

saw the image and the space between the image and its text on the wall. The potency of Kawauchi's photobooks lies in the flipping, between the pages, and in the fringes of images. *The River Embraced Me* thrives in this gap and makes, once again, imperfection photography's finest fire.

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