

Wee, Darryl. "Interview: Candida Hofer on Japanese Urban Space," *Blouin Artinfo*, February 26, 2014.

BLOUIN ARTINFO

INTERVIEW: Candida Hofer on Japanese Urban Space



Candida Höfer, *Palazzo Ducale Mantova I* (2011), 180 x 246.4 cm
(© Candida Höfer, Köln / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn)

TOKYO — Renowned German photographer **Candida Hofer**, a former student of Dusseldorf school pioneers Bernd and Hilla Becher, opens her first solo show in Japan at Yuka Tsuruno on March 8, coinciding with Art Fair Tokyo weekend. In advance of this landmark occasion, **BLOUIN ARTINFO** asked Hofer about how the notion of European public space depicted in much of her work differs from their Japanese equivalents, and her own relationship to the Japanese tradition of photography.

Your early pieces depict the rigid, symmetrical geometry of public spaces in Europe, including train stations, libraries, museums and gardens. In contrast, it is often said that such expansive public spaces do not exist on the same scale — and symmetrical proportions — in Japan. What is your impression of public space in Tokyo, and Japanese architecture more generally?

The little I know about Japan has left me with the impression that there is indeed no public space or semi-public space. Or maybe there is a different notion of it. In Europe, as well as areas that have been strongly influenced by European architecture, such as North and South America, these public spaces are representative displays of power, whether political, clerical, or financial, demonstrated through style. Symmetry itself seems to be such an expression. In Japan, the closest things to such spaces are parks and shrines, and perhaps Chinese-influenced temples.

I have been coming to Japan once or twice a year for several years now, trying to take photographs while here, but found myself too impressed and puzzled by these differences. Of course, there are famous

Japanese architects who have created spaces like the ones I focus on, like libraries or museums. When such spaces go beyond using “European” elements, they seem to prefer more organic forms, imperfections, and a sense of being close to nature — or even mixing with it. But in general, I don’t photograph landscapes or nature. Nor do I photograph cityscapes. So I felt restricted in terms of what I could photograph in Japan.

But due to certain circumstances, however, I found myself able to reverse my approach. At the request of a museum director and the artist On Kawara, I was given the opportunity to photograph his work in private collections. A great number of Kawara’s works are in private homes all over Japan, and this project provided me with the opportunity and privilege to visit them.

From the beginning, however, it was decided that the final project would be a book, with a more intimate form than an exhibition. My observations in Japan have also settled me into an approach that I have been following for a few years — now, I want to supplement my work by paying attention to the details that mark these spaces, whether they are public, private, or somewhere in between.

Some of your work can be seen as an attempt to document successive layers of historical change and the visual traces that render them visible within the context of public, highly visible space in European cities. In Japan — and Asia more generally — however, these traces are often discontinuous, with violent ruptures that sever contemporary architecture and space from historical context, due to factors such as the more reckless pace of city planning and redevelopment. What is your instinctive reaction to these urban landscapes, where architecture often exists under very different conditions to your European subjects?

This discontinuity you speak of seems to be a fundamental part of the experience of living in Japan — the knowledge of what nature can do to built things at any moment, or what people can do to them, for example. At the same time, however, perhaps there is also a different, perhaps more pragmatic attitude to the built environment and human existence in Japan, where it is difficult to find the “layers” you mention in one place. Old things are totally reconstructed, like how shrines are rebuilt at certain intervals, while totally unrelated things stand next to each other, like a small temple right beside a skyscraper.

But you rarely find layers, like what you can see in the Chipperfield reconstruction of the Neues Museum in Berlin, for example, which shows the original 19th century architecture, the wounds of war, and our modern understanding of how to show exhibits all in the same place.

Of course, Germany also experienced discontinuity — political discontinuity, and destruction during World War II. And the response has generally been reconstruction, like the attempt to rebuild the Berliner Schloss (City Palace) by taking down the Palast der Republik, which the East German government had built on the site of the Berliner Schloss after it had been partly destroyed in the war. But those are rather expressive political statements. The tendency in Germany is more to allow historical architecture to age, provided the economic pressure to rebuild is not too great.

In photographing your chosen spaces, how do you decide which angle and perspective to take?

The act of taking photographs comes in two distinct phases. There is the actual taking of the photograph at the site, and then there is the work that is done on its two-dimensional representation, the image itself. Over the years, the first phase seems to have happened almost instinctively, mostly guided by my impression of the light in the space. I generally find the right position for the camera and the angle fairly quickly, whereas when I work on the image afterwards, it is a mixture of what I remember and what the image itself seems to demand from me that guides my decisions. This second phase is mainly about the relationships between light and forms.

Are these formal decisions motivated by a desire to make audiences reassess these spaces in a different way?

It is not my intention to make the audience reassess anything. I just want to give them an opportunity to reflect on the image and their own experience of space — maybe even the experience of the space in which they view the image that stands before them. What then seems to happen as a result — but not as

an intended result — is that they have difficulties recognizing spaces that they have been going to every day.

Along with the Dusseldorf school of German photographers who studied under Bernd and Hilla Becher, Japan has cultivated its own generation of photographers who have tackled landscapes and architecture in a similarly rigorous and austere beautiful way, such as Hiroshi Sugimoto, Naoya Hatakeyama, and Taiji Matsue. Were you ever influenced by Japanese photography?

Living in Cologne, I am lucky to have a gallery in this city that specializes in Japanese photography (Galerie Priska Pasquer), with people there who are also very knowledgeable about the history of Japanese photography. Cologne is close to Dusseldorf, which hosts many Japanese cultural events due to the large Japanese community that lives there. I am also the happy owner of some Japanese photography.

But of course, it is not only Japanese photography I look at, and it is not only photography I look at, but also other art. So it becomes very difficult for me as an artist to clearly attribute influences. But what influences my perception strongly in general — and not only in photography — is a sense of balanced restriction, and what you call “beautiful austerity,” that I find and cherish in things Japanese.

Candida Hofer's solo exhibition runs at Yuka Tsuruno from March 7 through May 10.