

Japanese Style

Prof. Dr. Oliver Grau, 2005, professor for image science, Danube University, Krems, Austria

Along with names such as Wolfgang Tillmanns, Thomas Ruff and others, Michael Najjar is one of the most innovative and intriguing photographers of the past ten years. His *Japanese Style* is a series of large scale photographs offering a multi-layered, distanced, sometimes unsettling but almost always inspired, view of a wide range of highly differentiated aspects of Japanese life.

It is certainly no coincidence that Najjar's visual worlds have been created in a time when the image itself is undergoing an unprecedentedly swift process of change. If pictures in earlier times were rare occurrences, first cult objects, later the preserve of art and the world of the museum, nowadays in the age of the cinema, TV and the internet our lives are inextricably inter-woven in a mesh of visuals. As you are all aware, the image is conquering new territory. We zap ever more channels on our hydra-headed TVs whilst huge electronic screens spring up in our cities and our mobile phones send micromovies in real time. We are seeing the rise of the image as a computer-generated, virtual, 3D picture, seemingly endowed with a life of its own and capable of developing a true-to-life visual sensory domain. Interactive media are changing our perception of the image to a multi-sensory interactive field of experience in a time flow. The result is that previously unrepresentable objects, visual spaces and processes become optional, and the parameters of space and time can be reset at will whilst ever more use can be made of digital models and fields of experience.

Najjar's homage to Japanese popular culture and its reciprocal process of discovery and transformation is located in the heart of the globalisation-driven debate on multi, trans and inter- culturalism which has been largely shaped by theoreticians like Edward Said and Homi Babba. The question we have to address today is how can globalisation provide a framework for a multiplicity of highly heterogeneous societies? As we know, the process of cultural inter-penetration has not been primarily motivated by the relentless energy of global capital. It is a process that has been observed throughout history and Goethe's "East-West Divan" is only one milestone on the long road of cross-cultural pollination. Najjar can be seen as an explorer in these regions, continually grappling with these issues in the course of his long acquaintance with the regions of the world that interest him, in particular South America and Asia.

But what is the creative method behind Najjar's photographs? There is a concept which involves first of all quite traditional on-the-spot analogue photography which is then digitalised and parts of which are turned by the computer into collage to achieve the intended effect. The result is a composition which, as in the case of the work series on display here today, only represents a mere fraction of an actual physical location which is rather extended, over-layered, fused with other spatial elements and particles and unified in hyperreality. Such is Najjar's method of Hybrid Photography, one which derives from the documentary aesthetics of spatial composition, but which arranges them in an almost surreal manner, revealing them anew, and breathing fresh life into the age-old principle of *disegno* as formulated by renaissance artists such as Giorgio Vasari and Benvenuto Cellini. The artists of the 16th century took the extant repertoire of shapes and forms and from it selected those elements which appeared ideal to them, recombining them to outdo nature in accordance with the intention of the *disegno* principle. Najjar, on the other hand, connects up physical space with virtual space, to create those effective and suggestive image worlds that accompany us as we thread our way through the cityscape.

One of the key characteristics of Najjar's works is that they are not structured in a conventional sense but rather – in line with “empty centre” principle of Zen Buddhism – the flux lines of pictorial elements are weakened, even negated. Again and again we find the main event is situated on the periphery with lines radiating into the depths of the photograph, according to the tenet that the goal is always the journey itself, the process of continual transformation, direct experience. This view of the nature of things has been cogently expressed in the famous poem “Verses on the Faith Mind” (Hsin Hsin Ming) by the Zen master Seng Ts'an (?-606), the third Patriarch of Zen Buddhism:
Dreams, illusions, blossoms flying through the air, Why are you so eager to grasp them?

TELEMATICS

With the means of digital photography Michael Najjar approaches our telematic society and raises photography – whose demise has been so often prophesied – to a new level of media status. On a daily basis – but especially in exceptional situations like the war in Iraq – as we are only too well aware, we have ample opportunity to study how the media is increasingly focussed not on the dissemination of substantial content but on the production of sound-bites. The works of philosophers like Paul Virillio and Vilem Flusser highlight the increasing speed at which information is disseminated and show how substantial content is marginalised, overlapped and overlaid by new strata of what I

would call media-driven emotionality. You can read these critiques for which artists have found highly precise visual equivalencies.

However the dividing line between medium and urban space has become porous. The digital image is flexible and increasingly effaces the divisions between different genres. In the digital image differences between outside and inside, near and far, physical and virtual, biological and automata, image and body are all abolished – that is the whole point. Works are created that generate a space whose unique force derives from the effects produced.

Michael Najjar is a composer of visual-artificial spheres of perception whose most striking instances have perhaps been produced by the mediatisation of urban space in the advanced milieu of Japanese cities. Against this background, the fact that the world-famous Shibuyaki-Kids have become the object of his attention is only logical and demonstrates the mutual influences between media-driven representation and the intensification of the portrayed images of the young people as in a concave mirror. In a much more extreme manner than in other cities, these teens and twens have created their own reality, using their bodies and often radical fashion outfits to turn the world into a dream which the sweeping pendulum of an all-embracing media presence can enlarge, enhance and recombine in a seemingly infinite number of ways. Do these pictorial worlds appear as they are because this is the way people seem – or is it the exact reverse – it is this unanswerable question that I would like to leave you with as you embark on your journey through Michael Najjar's fascinating exhibition.