

Japan: An assessment

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What exactly do we mean by the term documentary? There was a time when we believed that it was possible to understand other people via their pictures. We could see how they worked, how they stood at a bench or operated a machine. We assumed that the world was peopled by workers, and that we could empathise with them. This idea still persists, but it is no longer taken for granted. We have to admit that others are or can be something of a mystery, and even that they/we have begun to exist differently. Under the old terms of reference we had an identity centred on our physical being. Now, on the other hand, we seem to lead a diffused existence, as part of a system or network. Formerly, in the 1940s and for some time afterwards, the person you met inhabited a circumscribed here and now. Today, or in the postmodern recent past, those we encounter often have part of their being elsewhere. They participate in a corporation perhaps, or belong to an exclusive culture, and their sign is often the mobile telephone. Patrícia Almeida's photographs are full of such markers of the network.

The old idea was that we worked and indeed had our being in labour, and that it was even a heroic and monumental state. Eventually we came to think of this as an illusion. Perhaps the weight of evidence was too great. It pointed to our spending much of our time in intermediate states, coming and going, waiting and watching. There are many pictures in this series of people waiting for the lights to change or for transport to arrive. And there are signs everywhere laying claim to attention.

Video is an ideal contemporary medium, although it has drawbacks in documentary. It is often marked by poor picture definition, which does some kind of justice to that interchangeable quality which marks us out today. It also allows us to focus on the kinetics of contemporary life, on the ways in which we interact in groups and crowds. What is it exactly to hurry, or to wait? Video makes it possible to register some of these characteristic conditions. Its shortcoming, though, is that it emphasises movement at the expense of setting. We may follow a videoed group as on CCTV and notice its dynamics, but it is difficult to say something about such dynamics. Video classifies its viewers as trackers and hunters, whereas still photography – certainly of the kind practised by Patrícia Almeida – invites discourse and analysis, because it invites us to spend time and to read the whole scene with its intricacies. In some of her scenes adolescent girls idle in a city square. Because of her tendency to use sets of pictures we can identify some of their body movements and postures; but as they are still photographs we can also read the scene and make something of their cultural context.

One implication of this series is that we live in an almost inhuman environment, overdetermined by the network. Some of the buildings on show are gridded to infinity and stand rank on rank to the horizon. More intimate spaces are piled high with placards and script under skeins of power-lines and assorted wires. All the same, and despite this wealth

of contemporary markers, Patrícia Almeida's project has its humanist side. She remarks on the Ages of Man. Youngsters kill time, and act out childish and youthful scenarios at road crossings and on the city's streets. Salarymen walk together purposefully. Pedestrians with baskets return to base. Encumbered cyclists sustain the domestic theme. It is easy to imagine domestic spaces beyond the facades, and all manner of particular interests, for there are quite different styles and costumes amongst her passers-by. Patrícia Almeida's Tokyo is a city with its tender side, and the promise of intimate and familial moments. Above all it is a city in which humanity appears to be vulnerable. It is not just that the buildings are enormous and out of proportion to the human scale but that they are accessed by pedestrians crossings on complex thoroughfares. Will the city with its profuse and labyrinthine culture be too much for them all? This is her suggestion time and again.

Contemporary art puts a premium on judgment. Biennale and gallery art has to fulfil certain requirements. It must be easily accessible because it is to be taken in at walking pace. Art which is too intricate will disrupt the flow. Photography, in these circumstances, has been left with the hermeneutic role, for it remains a private art dependent on the printed page. These pictures from Tokyo may look at first sight as if they too concern themselves with the surface of contemporary life, but on reflection it can be seen that they invoke other values and formats. Modernists in the great days (c. 1930) used binary structures: large and small, artificial and actual. Patrícia Almeida refers to that scheme of things. Some of her personnel have descended, by several generations, from 'The Family of Man': two childish lovers on a country road, in particular. But it is 'The Family of Man' very lightly brought to mind, and largely in terms of differences. Her opening triptych, with its suited workers coming and going seems to represent the length of the working day. Documentarists in the 1930s liked to recount 'a day in the life', and this triptych looks like a quotation, although the two citizens involved cast more or less the same shadow, pointing perhaps to a world where time itself has been subject to management. Elsewhere the sun declares itself unequivocally in a back street or courtyard painted in yellow and white. It makes dark marks of a reception disc, a ventilation cowl and a projected light fitting, and picks out a seated man scrutinising a handset. Such complicated and delightful troping points back to other traditions within the history of the medium: visual poetics especially, which were strongly established in modernist photography.

In one instance a woman stands at a juncture of pedestrian crossings in an industrial suburb. Like many of Patrícia Almeida's subjects she stands at a distance and is quite hard to make out. She herself seems to be looking into the distance, as if to read a sign off stage or to assess oncoming traffic. She is making up her mind, and could be taken as a leitmotif for this entire Japanese series where invitation is always to assess and to clarify, to think here, there and everywhere, to read the signs as well as we are able: sometimes quite literally...see KIOSK and LITTLE MERMAID, partly obscured.

Patrícia Almeida's Japanese series is one of the subtlest arrangements photography has to offer.