

Reconfiguring German pasts

Photos create new histories

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Special to The Japan Times

It is mostly an unremarkable location, except for the fact that it is in a bit of a shambles. Something has obviously taken place here, but the smooth surfaces and sharp edges of the architectural detail simply do not offer up any artistic intention.

Actually, Thomas Demand's "Room" (1994) is a surprising recreation of the conference area where Count Claus von Stauffenberg attempted to assassinate Hitler in 1944. Demand photographs crime-scene models he makes from cards and paper, but he leaves viewers without the benefit of the essential historical details. The picture is an abstracted construction — erasing "evidence" — that makes observers wonder if real historical settings might be so entirely sanitized of historical associations.

Demand's work is a good example of the multiple threads that run through contemporary German photography, which can be summed up as the documentation, interrogation and erasure of recent memories.

Such methodologies are on display at "Zwischen Wirklichkeit und Bild (Between Reality and Image)," an exhibition that was in Tokyo and is now in Kyoto till Feb. 12 as part of the cultural showcase "Deutschland in Japan 2005/06."

The earliest work in the show (from the 1950s) is by the influential Bernd and Hilla Becher, who trained their cameras on late-19th and early 20th-century industrial buildings that were scheduled for demolition. While their approach was archival and archaeological, there is little nostalgia for the past, and their focus was purely aesthetic.

This is certainly the case as well for other artists in the exhibition, who tweak memory and history as they digitally erase the details of sites (Andreas Gursky), reconstruct them (Demand) or build them almost from scratch (Bette Gutschow or Loretta Lux). Even in some of the most apparently documentary work, like that of Michael Schmidt — the most psychological-

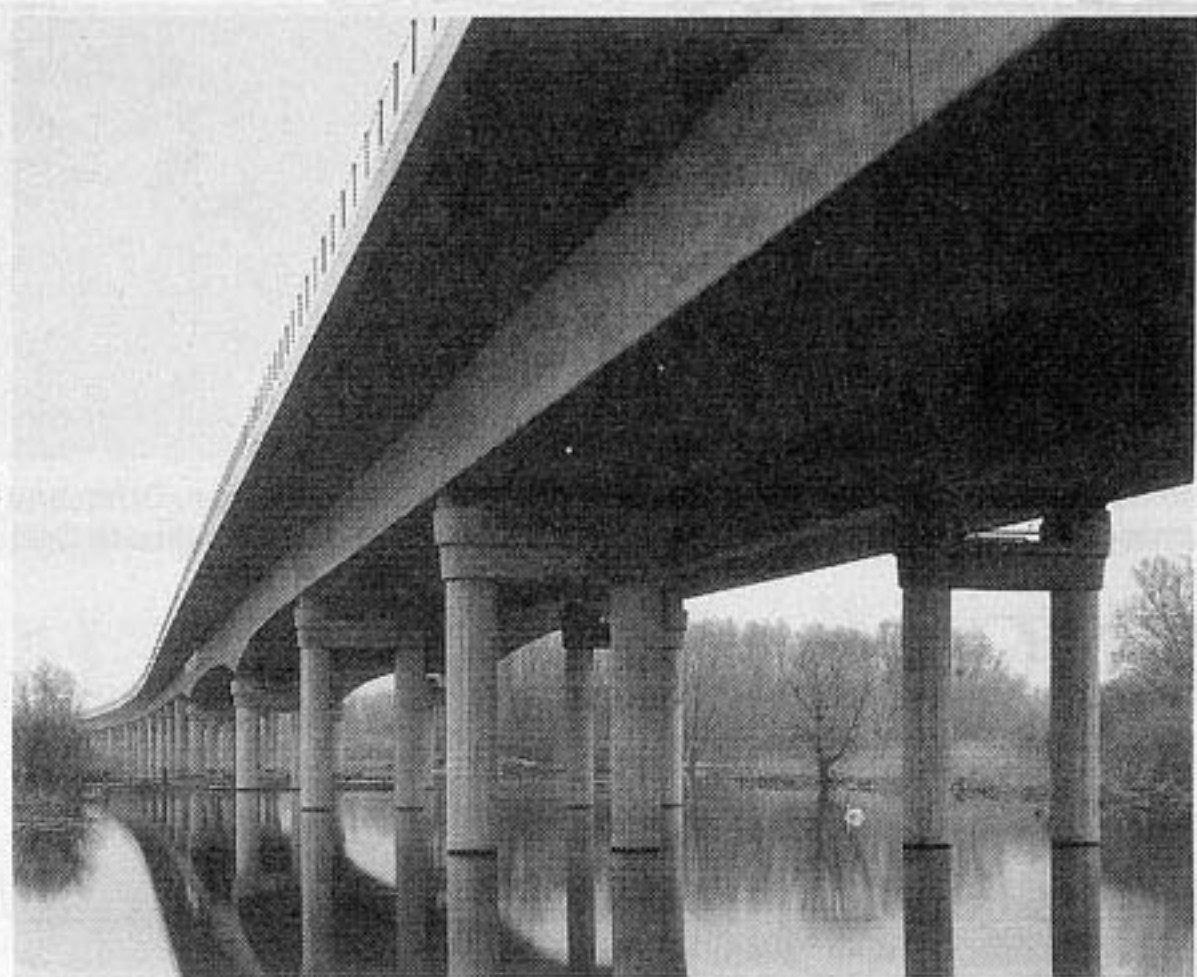
ly heavy in the show — history is a patchy record whose meanings are only partially accessible.

In "U-ni-ty" (1991-94), Schmidt's photo-essay of 85 images, the artist takes on Berlin and its shadows after the Wall came down in 1989. The portraits are tightly framed, at times claustrophobic, and at others reflective, or even public relations-like. Landscapes show dull cubic buildings with monotonous facades, and are interspersed with images from newspapers that show what could be Nazi-era footage of youth rallies. In total it is a spotty view of the recent past, difficult to reconcile, or even to perceive clearly.

While Schmidt reconfigures historical associations by juxtaposing images, Ricarda Roggan does it with real-world objects. She finds worn furniture from factories in the former East Germany that closed down after the reunification, and set them up in her studio as she originally found them. Against her stark, white walls, the setting appears confrontational. While the furniture designs easily reveal the impoverished austerity of the former socialist state, they ultimately offer nothing like a satisfying, full confession.

Hans-Christian Schink captures, and creates, such post-reunification reconfigurations in actual civil engineering projects. Schink came of age when a reunited German government was bent on bringing the East German infrastructure up to date, and in "Traffic Projects German Unity" he photographed enormous, socially progressive construction projects that were designed to increase commerce and goods distribution.

Referencing the German Romantic period with roads that disappear into misty no-man's-lands, he recreates the 18th-century Romantic concept of "The Sublime," in which imagery occasions an overwhelming sense of helplessness in the viewer. Here, in a contemporary context, the result seems to evoke less of an Utopian experience than political and so-



QUESTIONABLE REALITY — Demand's "Room" (1994) leaves out essential details of the story (top left), Lux's "The Walk" (2004) creates stories out of thin air (top right) and Schink's "A-20 — Peene Bridge Jarman" (2002) finds them in unexpected locations. PHOTOS COURTESY OF PINKOTHEK DER MODERNE, MÜNCHEN; TORCH GALLERY, AMSTERDAM; AND THE ARTIST

cial disillusionment.

Just as these photographers' interrogations of the past are an artistic strategy, so too is removing traces of the past's torments. Few modern countries have had to bear the heavy weight of history as much as Germany in the 20th century, and a younger generation of photographers appears set on making the world over again in response.

In "Rhein II" (1999), Andreas Gursky erased shrubbery and flattened the image into bands of color by minimizing cues for perspective. In cleaning up the landscape, his purpose was to create a "contemporary" one. Beate Gutschow took this further in forming fictitious vistas from a computer archive of landscape elements.

Loretta Lux, the most obviously extreme in her reconfigurations, takes pictures of children and digitally combines them with a suitable background. Raised in the former East Germany, Lux describes her childhood as one of "suffering under the ugliness of the world." Now, heightening colors and manipulating details — polishing the children's skin to the point where it looks unreal — she sees her work as a "metaphor for innocence and a lost paradise."

Amid all this confrontation with the national past, Wolfgang Tillmans stands outside the overall trend by withdrawing from addressing broad and entangled historical memory altogether. For Tillmans, being contemporary is of utmost importance, and so he

creates visual diaristic commentary on growing up in a globalized world of idols, friends, trends, fashions, banalities and beauties.

Tillmans discriminately constructs his work the way teenagers plaster their walls with posters, postcards and candid snaps large and small — all meaningful. His images capture that more intimate, fundamental human desire to create stories of one's own life by assembling into narratives the fragmentary bits of a personal past and present. Personal memory itself is an aesthetic product, infinitely amenable to being arranged and manipulated to suit the moment, the mood or the story told at the time.

The aesthetics of recent German photography are essentially an inheritance from the Bechers: meticulous composition combined with fastidious attention to detail, lighting, atmosphere and subject. Further mixing such aesthetic precision with a conceptual approach has done much to shift traditional discussion of photography: now it can move away from it being an art of documentation bound to "evidential authority" (played upon most calculatedly in Demand's "Room") to being a contemporary art that embraces a much more expanded field of possibility.

"Zwischen Wirklichkeit und Bild: Positionen Deutscher Fotografie der Gegenwart" is at The National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto, till Feb. 12; open 9:30 a.m.-5 p.m.; ¥650 entrance. It then shows at the Marugame Genichiro-Inokuma Museum of Contemporary Art, Kagawa-ken, March 12-May 7. For more information, call (075) 761-4111 or visit www.momak.go.jp.