CROSS-CULTURAL (MIS)UNDERSTANDINGS: INDEPENDENT PHOTOGRAPHY SINCE THE 1980s

It may seem paradoxical that, as the bilateral relationship has continued to mature since the 1970s, several contemporary Australian photographers have sought to focus on ambiguity and hidden tensions when picturing Japan. The deepening of relations—formalised in a series of new agreements on investment, industry, trade and defence¹—has coincided with growing official interest in the value of cultural diplomacy and recognition of the role of culture in promoting mutual understanding. The staged pictures of cultural exchange produced by the Australian News and Information Bureau in the 1960s revealed that interest-driven governmental photographic practices regularly trade in national clichés. Such a trade continues in the present, recycling the very outmoded stereotypes that governments seek to modernise. The independent photographers who are the focus of this chapter, by contrast, reject such representational complacencies to pursue more adventurous modes of image-making.

Unafraid to address complex and often challenging issues, their practices may nonetheless be seen as the product of an increasingly relaxed relationship between the two nations. The diversity of this work also

speaks to the many channels through which today’s photographers can engage with Japan, including cheap and frequent travel; opportunities to live and work in Japan for extended periods; ever-widening access to Japanese literature, art, popular culture, news, photobooks and fashion; and online media and social networking that provide the means to build and maintain friendships and professional connections from afar. These contemporary travelling photographers use their cameras not so much to ‘explain’ Japan or make the strange familiar as they do to raise questions and challenge assumptions. By seeking out the unsettling and the uncertain, interrogating them and making them sites for creativity, they highlight how moments of confusion and misunderstanding can be fertile ground in the photography of cross-cultural encounter.

The Art of Cultural Diplomacy

It was not until the 1970s that cultural diplomacy was formalised as a key component of Australian–Japanese relations. Cultural diplomacy is typically understood as a form of ‘soft power’ that helps to further national interests by encouraging other states to be receptive to one’s own national values.2 Prime ministers Kishi and Menzies discussed the expansion of cultural connections in the form of travelling art exhibitions and the exchange of students and scholars during the Australian leader’s visit to Japan in April 1957.3 Japan’s desire to gain acceptance internationally in the postwar order—beyond being a diplomatic or trading partner—meant that cultural diplomacy was to play an increasingly important role in its foreign policy in the following decades. Created with a five billion yen endowment (later increased to 50 billion), the Japan Foundation was established in 1972 as an international cultural agency that complemented Foreign Minister Takeo Fukuda’s policy focus on fostering ‘mutual understanding’.4 One of the main aims for the Japan

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Foundation was to promote Japan as a peaceful and economically advanced nation in other countries. Rising anxiety in the Asia-Pacific over Japan’s perceived economic strength and local dependence on Japanese trade, investment and development assistance was countered with the opening of Japan Foundation offices in most South-East Asian countries during the 1970s and 1980s. Its Australian office was opened in Sydney in 1978.

Australia likewise sought to ensure a healthy bilateral relationship through cultural diplomacy initiatives in the 1970s. An Act of parliament established the bilateral body the Australia-Japan Foundation in 1976. One of its main functions was to ‘encourage a closer relationship between the peoples of Australia and Japan, and to further the knowledge and understanding of each other.’ It was hoped that, by fostering people-to-people relations at the non-government level, the foundation would help to maintain friendly relations and confront negative, limiting or deep-seated stereotypes that could undermine successful diplomatic relations. In place of lingering perceptions of Australia as a large country with a small population, blessed by natural resources and populated by picturesque flora and fauna, the Australian Government actively promoted the image of a stable, multicultural and technologically advanced society distinguished by its artistic and intellectual excellence.

Cultural diplomacy initiatives are traditionally distinguished from cultural relations, which tend to be driven by non-state actors whose international activities are the result of trade, travel, personal relationships, migration, entertainment, communication and cultural exchanges. However, this distinction is not always clear cut. Governments often pursue their aims by sponsoring or exhibiting the work of independent practitioners, provided that the initiatives reflect the state’s agenda. One example of this crossover is the exhibition Continuum ’83, the first major exhibition of Australian contemporary art in Japan held in 1983. Continuum ’83 was initiated by a group of Australian artists who

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lived and worked in Japan in the late 1970s and early 1980s, including performance artist Stelarc, the sculptor John Davis, the sculptor and video artist Peter Callas and jeweller and sculptor Maryrose Sinn. Produced with the help of Emiko Namikawa, director of the Lunami Gallery in Tokyo, and several gallerists and curators in Melbourne, Continuum ’83 involved 15 rental galleries in Ginza and 18 major artists including installation artists, performance artists, sculptors and photographers. These exhibitions were supplemented by programs of video art, film, sound, posters, artists’ books and performance art, bringing the total number of artist participants to over 70.

Rather than producing new work in direct response to Japan or Australian–Japanese relations, organisers selected existing artworks that complemented the central curatorial theme of ‘Land, Earth, Environment and Australia’s Polycultural Society’. This theme tapped into long-held Japanese impressions of Australia as a vast, underpopulated outback, while the emphasis on sculpture, installation, performance and photography reflected Japanese interests in contemporary art. The photography component included Sue Ford’s portraits Time Series, Virginia Coventry’s conceptual landscape work Whyalla-Not a Document, John Williams’ Living Room Portraits and Douglas Holleley’s A Portfolio of Colour Photographs Made on the Last Day of Luna Park. It was hoped that, by focusing on common creative ground and building on existing impressions of Australia, the event would provide a means of pursuing the larger aim of encouraging dialogue between Australian and Japanese artists and galleries based on ‘mutual interests’.10

Although Continuum ’83 was an initiative of independent artists rather than governments, its discourse of mutual understanding and interest lent itself well to the concerns of cultural diplomacy. Continuum ’83 received funding from the Japan Foundation, Australia-Japan Foundation, Australian Embassy in Tokyo and Australia Council Visual Arts Board, in addition to support from many corporate sponsors from both countries. Ken Scarlett, the director of Gryphon Gallery who was instrumental in organising Continuum ’83, adopted the official discourse of ‘friendship’ and ‘mutual understanding’ in the bilingual catalogue:

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Forty years ago we were enemies at war—but no nation suffered more than Japan at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Now trade and tourism are helping to destroy the memories of those tragic years. But friendship based on trade may last only as long as the trade is profitable.

Continuum ‘83, Scarlett proclaimed, is:

‘A further step, a significant advance in understanding. Japanese and Australian artists and gallery directors are working together to make their respective cultures known outside their own countries … Not just Australian coal to Japan and Japanese cars to Australia but a two-way trade in people and ideas!’

This two-way trade was pursued further two years later with Continuum ‘85, which presented Japanese contemporary art to Australians.

The ideal of mutual understanding recurs in discourses surrounding more recent touring exhibitions, including Sun Gazing: The Australia-Japan Art Exhibition Touring Program, 2002–04 supported by Asialink and the Australia-Japan Foundation; Rapt!: 20 Contemporary Artists from Japan (2006) held in the Australia–Japan Year of Exchange; and Imminent Landscape (2012) exhibited at the Japan Foundation Gallery in Sydney. The artistic director and exhibitor in Imminent Landscape, Utako Shindo, commented in the bilingual catalogue that the aim of the initiative was ‘to create active dialogues for not just the artists but also the broader art communities in both Japan and Australia’.

However, in selecting cultural forms for export that are expected to be meaningful to a foreign audience, there is often a temptation to draw on imagery that already has currency and neglect the more complex relationships that nations share. Continuum ‘83 highlights how, in aiming to foster mutual understanding, initiatives may end up exporting imagery that reinforces, rather than challenges, stereotyped impressions. In her critique of this event for Art Network, Lyndal Jones noted: ‘It is apparent that there was an attempt at providing a bridge of understanding; the ease

13 Utako Shindo, Imminent Landscape (Sydney: Japan Foundation, 2010), unpaginated.
of familiarity rather than the shock of foreignness'. This emphasis on the ‘ease of familiarity’ meant that, at least to some Japanese critics, *Continuum ’83* confirmed long-held conceptions of Australia as a ‘fenceless zoo’ set apart from heavily urbanised, densely populated Japan. Writing in response to *Continuum ’83*, Toshio Matsuura argued that Australian and Japanese artists were concerned with fundamentally different approaches to nature, underpinned by Australia’s youth—and implicit lack of development—in comparison to Japan’s ancient cultural traditions. Australian art has not yet come to terms with its environment, argued Matsuura, as evinced in artworks that provide ‘literal translations of nature’. The critic contrasted this lack of maturity with the deeper engagement with nature developed over centuries of Japanese fine art practice.

The hugely popular feature film *Crocodile Dundee* (1986)—widely screened in Japan—nourished such impressions, as did Australian tourism promotion in the 1980s, whose reductive emphasis on wildlife and outback imagery simplified and commodified Australia. In a speech about public diplomacy to the Australia-Asia Association in Melbourne in 1990, then–Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade Gareth Evans stressed the importance of challenging such narrow views of Australia as ‘a land of open spaces, exotic flora and fauna, an exporter of commodities – and a good place to relax’. ‘At a time of great change in the structure of international relations’, he argued ‘it is more important than ever that relations among nations be based on an accurate understanding of each other’s society and culture’. Yet, the image of the unpeopled outback continues to be invoked in cultural diplomacy initiatives as a dominant signifier of Australia. The Culture Centre of the Australian Embassy in Tokyo, for example, has promoted the work of Japanese photographer Aihara Masaaki, who has been photographing the Australian landscape for over 20 years. Aihara’s colour photographs typically present a landscape that is undeveloped and devoid of signs of human inhabitation. Emphasis is on the rich colours of the earth, the enormous skies and apparently boundless expanses of land. As well as featuring this work on its website,

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15 These ideas can be tracked to the Meiji period. See Alison Broinowski, ‘About Face: Asian Representation of Australia’ (PhD diss., The Australian National University, Canberra, 2001), 8.
the Australian Embassy in Tokyo hosted exhibitions of Aihara’s work in 1998 and 2000 and has acquired some of his photographs for its official collection. While the embassy’s support of a local photographer is laudable, its choice of this particular work does little to challenge the impression that the Australian Government has long sought to change.

Landscape was again featured prominently in the Australian Government’s publicity for the ‘Australia Now’ initiative, delivered in Japan in 2018 as part of its public diplomacy ‘Focus Country Program’. The website of the Australian Embassy in Tokyo described the aims of the program in terms of overcoming stereotypes: ‘strengthening and deepening bilateral ties and building understanding beyond our landscape and lifestyle. Most of all Australia Now is about building relationships for the future’. The diverse program involved performances, cultural and sporting events, and offered opportunities for partnership building in business. However, despite the goal of building understanding ‘beyond our landscape and lifestyle’, the online event promotion was illustrated, predictably, with photographs of the unpopulated outback.18

The Shock of Foreignness

Unmotivated by the economic and political benefits of soft power, the contemporary photographers discussed in the remainder of this chapter relish the creative potential of more complex histories and experiences when forging alternative, informal cross-cultural photographic relations. While Continuum ’83 aimed to eschew ‘the shock of foreignness’ to promote mutual understanding, Melbourne photographer Christopher Köller embraced it. Fulfilling a long-held ambition to spend time in Japan, Köller lived in Kyoto for 19 months between August 1982 and January 1984, supporting himself by teaching English. Japan’s economic growth in the 1970s meant that more Japanese citizens had the means and opportunity to travel overseas, and more came into contact with foreigners as part of their business activities. As interest in learning English increased, so did opportunities for Australians to teach in Japan. Teaching provided a certain amount of flexibility for Köller, allowing him to spend his free days studying bonsai and photographing. His experience at the bonsai nursery was a reminder of the limits of intercultural connection and understanding: ‘They never called me by

my real name the entire time. They just banged on the table with a big stick and pointed at me to do things. It was hysterical’. However, Köller’s work is also the product of many happy, productive and enduring relationships with new friends.

Köller began working on his series Zen Zen Chigau (1984) four months into his stay. The title translates roughly as ‘something out of the ordinary’ and is indicative of Köller’s choice of subjects. Rejecting a photojournalistic approach and a reliance on the visual clichés of temples and geisha, Köller’s 23 black and white photographs are staged to reflect his own responses as an outsider to strange occurrences and stories encountered in Japan. ‘These photographs are about my Western preoccupation with and attempts to understand an alien culture and thinking’, said Köller. ‘Their purpose in my mind is not to document “objective” thinking’. The photographs also reflect the ever-diversifying ways that contemporary Australians could access and consume Japanese culture in the 1980s. The images are variously inspired by newspaper articles, Japanese literature, Zen Buddhist philosophy, television programs, film, traditional theatre, popular music and Köller’s own observations as a traveller and temporary resident in Japan. He recalled: ‘I read a lot of Japanese novels by Kôbô Abe and by Jun’ichirô Tanizaki and also by Yukio Mishima and I would get ideas from there’. Being without a studio pushed Köller to be creative in his staging of these ideas. The cast was selected from his circle of friends and students, and sets were improvised in spaces that he could find. Köller’s sketchbooks and notes reveal how carefully he considered his tableaux, noting details like the expression on the models’ faces and the direction of their gazes, as well as composition, costume and lighting.

There is an evocative tension in the finished photographs, in which stories are implied but never fully explained. Inspired by the words of English painter Francis Bacon—who aimed to ‘give the sensation [of a story] without the boredom of its conveyance’—Köller carefully stripped back elements of the story to leave something for the viewer to invest in the work. This process is evident in his photograph inspired by the horrific

20 Christopher Köller, interview with Melissa Miles, 6 February 2018.
crimes of Issei Sagawa, sensationalised in press coverage while Köller was in Japan (see Figure 6.1). Sagawa was living in Paris studying literature at the Sorbonne in 1981 when he murdered his classmate, a Dutchwoman called Renée Hartevlt, raped her corpse and, over two days, cannibalised her. When Sagawa was arrested he was carrying a suitcase containing her body parts; he had been attempting to dispose of them in a public park. The police discovered other body parts in Sagawa’s refrigerator at home. After reading about this case of cannibalism, Köller became conscious of the recurrence of this sexual fetish in Japanese literature. A passage from Kōbō Abe’s Box Man: A Novel was copied into Köller’s notebook:

First I shall woo the girl boldly, and if I am refused (and refused I shall be), I shall kill her over a period of days. I shall enjoy eating her corpse. This is not a figure of speech; I shall literally put her in my mouth, chew

Figure 6.1. Christopher Köller, Untitled from the series Zen Zen Chigau, 1984. Source: Courtesy of the artist.
on her, relish her on my tongue ... She is submissive, and even when she turns into meat, her smile will be unquenchable and she will have a taste somewhere between veal and wild fowl and will be utterly delectable.\textsuperscript{24}

Recreated with the help of one of Köller’s students and a friend who worked as a nude model, his photograph does not sensationalise Sagawa’s crime. There is no blood or gore; the violence is implied by the nude woman seen only from the waist down lying on a table covered in newspapers, the open fridge door and the dishevelled male figure positioned to the side of the foreground to create compositional tension. Sagawa’s story grew stranger after Köller made this work. After his return to Japan and subsequent release from a psychiatric hospital in 1986, Sagawa made a living writing restaurant reviews and books, appearing in an exploitation film and public speaking, and was the focus of the 2007 documentary \textit{The Cannibal that Walked Free}.

Another of Köller’s photographs refers to a news article, this time about a suicide pact between three junior high schoolgirls who jumped off the roof of a high-rise building in Yokohama (see Figure 6.2). The girls reportedly appeared cheerful to their families, who could not fathom what led them to take their own lives. Japan’s seeming obsession with self-destruction—from the ceremonial disembowelling known as \textit{harakiri} or \textit{seppuku} to the kamikaze ‘suicide gods’ that terrorised Allied navies in WWII—has long fascinated Western observers.\textsuperscript{25} Attitudes to Japanese schoolgirls are another source of fascination. Thanks to \textit{manga}, Japanese porn and the Western media’s reports on \textit{joshi-kosei} cafes—where adult men pay a premium to share the company of schoolgirls—demure, innocent schoolgirls have become key symbols of fetishised Japanese femininity. Pointedly, however, Köller does not sexualise his schoolgirl models. Their dowdy uniforms suggest they are utterly respectable and the brown paper he put down so that their uniforms would not be dirtied by lying on the concrete roof suggests his concern for his models. The girls’ staged yet subtle expressions convey a range of possible emotions—the central figure’s eyes are closed in introspection and she is without her shoes, one friend looks to her for guidance, while the other

appears anxious as she stares straight ahead. The vertiginous tilt of the composition creates the impression that the girls are about to fall, their hands linked to signify their pact.

Other photographs in Köller’s series are much less confronting; they include portraits of his friends, his bonsai teacher and uniformed workers, as well as references to Japanese literature and theatre. Together, the photographs appealed greatly to contemporary Australian audiences. Köller recalled:

My Japanese show was very successful. I made enough money to go back overseas and I just couldn’t print them fast enough. Everybody loved the show, I got great reviews and it seemed like everybody wanted another Japanese show.²⁶

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Between 1984 and 1988, *Zen Zen Chigau* was exhibited in Melbourne, Adelaide, Sydney and London, and a selection was later exhibited in a group show in 2005.27 Beatrice Faust’s review of *Zen Zen Chigau* at Melbourne’s Photographer’s Gallery in 1984 suggests that the photographs tapped into popular impressions of enigmatic Japan:

> Owing little to current Japanese photography, they are still peculiarly Japanese, at once familiar and bizarre, open and shuttered, humanly emotional and dispassionately controlled, whimsical and earnest, trivial and important, elaborate and simple.28

Robert Rooney similarly spoke of the contradictions that characterise ‘outsiders’ views of this ‘land of contrasts’, its refined taste and its perceived capacity for extreme cruelty.29

The exhibition of Köller’s work coincided with rising public anxieties about the threat posed by Japanese business and export activities to local interests. In this context, his photograph of a young, suited Japanese man who had killed and was about to devour a European woman perhaps resonated in ways that Köller did not intend. As the Japanese economy matured in the late 1980s and early 1990s, there was rising concern in the Asia-Pacific about Japan’s rapidly growing power. Japan’s share of total investment in Australia increased from 8.7 per cent in 1981 to 17.9 per cent in 1991, making it the second largest source of investment after the US. The rise in Japanese investment in Australian real estate skyrocketed from zero in 1980–81 to 49.2 per cent, or US$1,255 million, in 1991–92. The public perception of this investment was bound up with the increased visibility of Japanese visitors, including businessmen and ever-growing numbers of tourists. The total number of visitors from Japan increased nearly fourfold from 1984 to 1988, and tourist visitors increased fivefold (to 294,000) in 1988. Japanese visitor arrivals continued to increase substantially in the early 1990s, reaching 813,100 in 1996.30

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27  For example in the group exhibition *Loaded* at Gallery 101 in 2005.
28  Beatrice Faust, ‘From Japan, an Exhibition of Images to Haunt the Memory’, *Age*, 10 December 1984, 14.
Political leaders naturally embraced the palpable Japanese interest in Australia. Then-Treasurer Paul Keating declared during the visit of Prime Minister Takeshita in 1988 that:

Our friendship is reflected in the very large numbers of Japanese families who are visiting our country as tourists, and enjoying our hospitality and the grandeur of our landscape. Let me say, Mr Prime Minister, that your fellow countrymen and women are very welcome guests to Australia.31

However, the mass media and general public were not always as supportive of the growing Japanese presence. Two particular Japanese investment initiatives were met with heated public debate—a plan to establish Japanese retirement settlements in Australia (the ‘Silver Columbia’ project) and the Japanese Government’s proposal for a Multi-Function Polis. References in the press to the ‘Japanese takeover’, ‘Japanvader’ and ‘the polite invasion’, along with the catchcries ‘Australia for Australians’ and ‘Wake up Australia’, recurred in the late 1980s. ‘Lest we forget’ was a particularly pointed rebuke of excessive Australian enthusiasm for Japanese investment.32 In the press, photographs helped to establish the link between the growing presence of Japanese tourists and Australia’s historical fear of Asian invasion, which had seemed likely to be realised in 1942. In a special supplement to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the end of WWII in 1995, the Sydney Morning Herald included a large photograph of four smiling young Japanese tourists posing in front of the Sydney Harbour Bridge under the headline ‘Engaging the Enemy’. While the article itself told the story of a positive relationship built after the war, the combination of photograph and headline linked the mass arrival of Japanese tourists to this wartime history.33

As Japan experienced a comparable backlash in other parts of Asia, Japanese cultural diplomacy became one of the ‘three pillars’ of its foreign policy, alongside official aid policies and contributions to international peacekeeping operations. Politically, Japan and Australia became strong regional allies during this period. Australia acted as kind of a mediator or ‘cushion’ when much of Asia remembered all too clearly Japan’s wartime history of aggression and brutality. Prime Minister Hawke supported Japan’s permanent membership on the United Nations Security Council and the participation of the Japanese defence force in United Nations

31 Quoted in ibid., 109.
32 Ibid., 108.
33 David Jenkins, ‘Engaging the Enemy’, Sydney Morning Herald, 15 August 1995, 10V.
peacekeeping missions in Cambodia and the Persian Gulf. Although Japanese troops in Cambodia were admitted on the condition that they remain unarmed, the nation’s eagerness to send its troops to a foreign country on policing operations opened old wounds. Coupled with renewed disputes with China and South Korea over ownership of what Japan calls Takeshima and the Senkaku Islands, activists and government officials in both countries repeatedly criticised Japan for its perceived ‘lack of contrition’ for the brutalities committed during their periods of annexation and occupation earlier in the twentieth century.³⁴ Speaking to the New Sunday Times, Singapore’s Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew claimed in 1991: ‘Allowing Japan to once again send its forces abroad is like giving a chocolate liqueur to an alcoholic. Once the Japanese get off the wagon, it will be hard to stop them’.³⁵

Cooperation between Australia and Japan was critical in this regional context and central to the creation of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in 1989 and the development of APEC leaders meetings in 1993–95. It was hoped that, by coming together, Australia and Japan could build regional cooperation.³⁶ This diplomatic relationship was not without its tensions. Japanese concern over Australia’s protection of its manufacturing industry and Australia’s grievances about Japan’s agricultural protectionism were among the issues. There were also ongoing disagreements over Japanese whaling and Japan’s refusal to acknowledge its abuse of comfort women during WWII. The Japanese Government’s unwillingness to apologise for its wartime brutality, particularly regarding its mistreatment of prisoners of war, added another point of tension.

Given the importance of this bilateral relationship, Australia’s dwindling investment in cultural diplomacy during the 1990s is surprising. Asialink was established in 1990 amid an apparent upward turn as a body dedicated to delivering high-level forums, international collaborations, leadership training, education, community health and cultural programs in Australia and Asia. Its art program helped Australian

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artists to work more effectively and easily in the Asian region. In 1991, a new international arts policy was introduced with a commitment that, by 1992–93, 50 per cent of the international budget would be spent on Asian or Pacific-oriented projects under the title ‘Asia-Pacific Connections’. However, this new policy impacted on a small percentage of the overall Australia Council budget and was criticised as a symbolic stunt for ‘political self-protection’. Several commentators have noted the subsequent, ever-dwindling governmental support for Asialink and Australian cultural programs in Asia. Ien Ang, Yudhishthir Raj Isar and Phillip Mar argued that despite government attempts to develop a more integrated approach, cultural diplomacy activities tend to be modest, dispersed and have been subject to ‘almost continual budget erosion over the past fifteen years, leading some commentators to speak about Australia’s diplomatic deficit’. In this climate, non-state cultural organisations and actors have become increasingly more important in filling the void. While there is a chance that photography projects that explore cross-cultural tensions—like Köller’s—may be received in a manner that reinforces attitudes that run counter to the interests of governments, such projects are valuable because they acknowledge important issues of interpretation and dynamism in bilateral relations.

Photographic Connections and the Limits of Understanding

For Australian photographer Kristian Häggblom, photography offers a means of immersing himself in Japan and thinking deeply about its culture, spaces and people. Häggblom first travelled to Japan in 1999 after graduating from his photography studies in Melbourne. In contrast to Köller, Häggblom was not pursuing a long-term ambition to visit Japan and did not have many expectations about what he might find there. His reasons for choosing Japan were more pragmatic—employment opportunities and favourable visa requirements meant that it was a place where he could feasibly spend an extended period of

time. Häggblom ended up living in Japan for eight years, mainly in Tokyo, and married a Japanese woman. The income Häggblom earned working as an English teacher and his flexible working hours freed him to spend time walking through Tokyo, photographing as he went, in particular, exploring the photography galleries and second-hand camera stores in hyper-urban Shinjuku. During his walks, Häggblom was also mindful of his own family history. His uncle Michael (Mick) Kelly’s ship was sunk by the Japanese in WWII. During the subsequent Occupation, Kelly managed a port in Kobe and developed a great fondness for Japan. He returned regularly, including while Häggblom was living there. Although Kelly rarely spoke about his war experiences, his time in Japan was in Häggblom’s mind as he walked the Tokyo streets and throughout the country.

In 2001, with fellow Australian Warren Fithie, Häggblom opened a gallery called Roomspace above one of the many bars in Shinjuku’s famous Omoide Yokochō, known colloquially as ‘Piss Alley’. Roomspace was a modest gallery, as its name suggests, that exhibited photographs, paintings and other experimental works for over a year. After returning to Australia, Häggblom also worked to introduce Australian audiences to less well-known Japanese photographers at his Wallflower Photomedia Gallery in regional Victoria, established in 2012 with Ross Lake through Arts Mildura. Häggblom continues to return to Japan regularly to develop new bodies of photographic work and heighten the profile of Japanese photographers in Australia.

Häggblom’s own photographs reflect his cerebral approach to photography in which ideas are explored over time through large interconnected bodies of work. Drawn to open areas where urban landscapes and nature meet, such as riverways and parks, he is interested in ‘vernacular spaces’ and how these are used in diverse, very personal or ritualised ways. Häggblom’s series O’Hanami centres on the parks occupied en masse during the annual cherry blossom festival. He steadfastly avoids fetishising the delicate blossoms as symbols of the cycles of life and death or an essentially feminine Japan. Rather, he turns his camera towards the

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41 Kristian Häggblom, interview with Melissa Miles, 17 January 2018.
42 Häggblom plans to investigate Kelly’s wartime history further in the future.
43 Wallflower Gallery closed at the end of 2015. Häggblom still works under this title as a not-for-profit organisation to facilitate activities that include an exhibition at the Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne, of contemporary Japanese photography. See www.tsukaproject.com/ (accessed 12 March 2018).
sometimes drunken *hanami*, or cherry blossom viewing parties, that take place in public parks across Tokyo. Shooting in large format, Häggblom’s photographs are exceptionally detailed. One photograph (see Figure 6.3) focuses on young men dressed in eggplant and daikon costumes, relaxing on the outstretched blankets that mark out their much sought after place beneath the trees. A pair of legs and torso belonging to a man partially out of shot, and seemingly passed out, can be seen next to two young women slouched at a picnic table, looking right at Häggblom’s camera, bleary-eyed from the day’s celebration. Another photograph (see Figure 6.4) shows older men sitting on unfeasibly small picnic chairs around an equally tiny table on which food and drink has been served. Younger women sit by the river, with their pile of plastic bags gathered behind them. The hole in Häggblom’s camera bellows creates light leaks in several photographs that pit the slightly awkward and messy reality of the festival against a romanticised ideal.

The product of countless hours spent walking off the track beaten by tourists in the areas between metropolitan train lines, Häggblom’s substantial body of work *Nihon* (1999–ongoing) brings together large format photographs of open urban spaces and anonymous-looking buildings. The scenes are sometimes taken from slightly different angles or moments apart to afford subtle changes in light and texture. These large photographs act as structuring elements that map the terrain of Tokyo for the project, while other images explore more poignant uses of space, including those in rural areas. Some photographs in *Nihon* are carefully staged with the help of Japanese friends and students to recreate odd moments that Häggblom witnessed, such as a man chopping a whole watermelon by a river, or another young man posing nude by a waterway in front of his camera phone mounted on a tiny tripod. These images are punctuated with studies of small details observed in the streets from Häggblom’s *Dossier #1* (2015–ongoing). Including strange photographs of a doorknob encased in paint, an abandoned suitcase and folding table stacked neatly by a footpath, and a second-storey doorway leading to a sudden, deadly drop into an alley, this large body of photographs can be edited and arranged to allude to different open-ended narratives.
Figure 6.3. Kristian Häggblom, Yoyogi #11, 2006.
Source: Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 6.4. Kristian Häggblom, Kichijoji #6, 2006.
Source: Courtesy of the artist.
Aokigahara Jukai (The Blue Sea of Foliage) is Häggblom’s best known and most personal series. It is concerned with a stretch of forest situated at the base of Mt Fuji. Häggblom returned to this forest several times between 2000 and 2018. These photographs reflect his larger interest in the ritualised uses of open outdoor spaces and how the landscape has been shaped by those uses. Noted in tourist guides for its views of Mt Fuji and its lakes, the area is a popular hiking spot. In Häggblom’s photographs, the forest is largely devoid of people but is littered with remnants of their visits. Whether due to the disorienting, undulating landscape or stories about the magnetic properties of iron deposits in the soil that purportedly confound compass readings, this area has a reputation as a site where people get lost. A confusing tangle of strings is visible in some of Häggblom’s photographs (see Figure 6.5), left by visitors who trail the long lengths behind them as they enter the forest so they may follow the string to navigate their way out again.

Figure 6.5. Kristian Häggblom, Aokigahara Jukai, *Bible Translations*, 2000.
Source: Courtesy of the artist.
This is also a site where people willingly submit to the enveloping forest.44 Signs pleading visitors not to end their lives and religious texts nailed to trees reveal the forest as an infamous suicide spot; indeed, it is described in Wataru Tsurumi’s best-selling book, *The Complete Manual of Suicide*, as the perfect place to die.45 Occasionally seen among the dead leaves on the forest floor are personal objects that people have left behind. A backpack, a Donald Duck badge and a plastic bag can be seen in one of Häggblom’s photographs (see Figure 6.6), while others show a membership card, a shoe and the remains of a meal. There is a sense of intimacy in these objects, as we wonder why they were taken into the forest and by whom.

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One photograph includes decomposing human remains, thus drawing attention to some challenging ethical questions. There is ongoing debate in Japan about whether it is the responsibility of the local council to recover and attempt to identify human remains that lie in the forest. The ‘suicide forest’ has also become a site for dark tourism. There have been no less than seven films made about the ‘haunted forest’, including independent films like Shan Serafin’s *Forest of the Living Dead* (2010) and Gus Van Sant’s *The Sea of Trees* (2015) starring Matthew McConaughey, Ken Watanabe and the Australian actress Naomi Watts. Sensationalised responses to *Aokigahara Jukai* reached a new low in 2017 when 22-year-old American YouTube star Logan Paul used one man’s suicide as clickbait for his 15 million plus subscribers. In Paul’s video, he and his friends laugh and joke near the body of a young man who hangs limp from a tree. The camera scans up and down his body, lingering on his blue hands and the wallet that still sits in his back pocket. ‘This is the craziest moment in my life’, proclaims Paul in an extraordinary moment of narcissism, before the video continues with a scene of him greeting fans in the carpark. The international outrage at Paul’s post led him to apologise for his thoughtlessness. Yet, this and so many other references to the forest in popular culture underscores the way that suicide persists as a marker of the ‘otherness’ of Japan in contemporary Western cultures. Debt suicides supposedly speak to the Japanese sense of duty, while the suicides of depressed teenagers who had withdrawn from life are seen as signs of the pressures of conformity and family obligation.

Rather than subscribe to these clichés of quintessential ‘Japoneseness’, Häggblom’s photographs quietly underscore the humanity of those affected by suicide. The photographer comments on the importance of addressing the enormity of suicide in Japan, where help lines are overstretched, investment in prevention programs is lacking, mental health care for those at risk is inadequate and some 25,000–30,000 Japanese succeed in taking their own lives each year. Häggblom stresses the need to talk about suicide in Japan and understand its causes and profound impacts. However, this is a fine balancing act in photography. In the critical reception of these photographs in Melbourne when they were exhibited in 2005, it was suggested that the photographs act as ‘evidence’ of something fundamentally Japanese:
In depicting evidence of these contradictory, yet co-existing engagements with Aokigahara Jukai, Häggblom alludes to the tangle of cultural, social and psychological forces that shape Japanese society beyond the forest but which are thrown into sharp relief in this small stretch of land.  

Other responses to this work have been far less sensitive. Häggblom made the decision to remove one of his photographs from his website because it had been taken without permission and used in an offensive online video. A risk is that the fetishisation of Japanese suicide by Western audiences will see this critical issue pushed off the international agenda altogether. Häggblom ultimately highlights the importance of being mindful of this Orientalist tendency and maintaining empathy and respectful conversation. Although it is highly unlikely that photographs about suicide will be embraced officially in aid of bilateral relations, Häggblom’s work opens up a space for another, extremely important type of dialogue.

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Like Häggblom, Matthew Sleeth returns to the same subjects to form large bodies of photographs that address a central idea. Whereas Häggblom’s work is the product of many years living and working in Japan, Sleeth’s photographs reflect the preoccupations and experiences of a repeat, short-term visitor. His more recent practice is concerned with sculpture, installation, performance and film, but photography was a major focus during Sleeth’s early trips to Japan. Sleeth first visited Japan in 2002 while accompanying his partner, furniture designer Sally Thomas, who was participating in a group exhibition at the Australian Embassy in Tokyo. The city’s glary neon, consumer culture and dense urban environment lent itself well to Sleeth’s photography practice at that time. His approach built on the somewhat ‘joyless’ deadpan 1960s conceptual art photography—in which photographs were produced to convey a central idea—and infused it with the ‘seductive visual language’ of popular culture, fashion and cinema.\(^{47}\) On that first brief visit in 2002, Sleeth produced *Feet* (2002), a series of colour photographs framed tightly on the feet and legs of train commuters. Together, the

\(^{47}\) Matthew Sleeth, interview with Melissa Miles, 18 January 2018.
photographs of differently clad feet variously dangling, sitting neatly, ‘manspreading’ or pointing towards the train door in anticipation of a quick exit, draw attention to the subtle social habits that occupy our attention amid the confinement and boredom of an urban train trip. Sleeth returned to Tokyo several times following this initial visit. *Abandoned Umbrellas* (2004) responds to Japanese umbrella culture. It centres particularly (but not exclusively) on the cheap clear plastic umbrellas sold in convenience stores when rain unexpectedly pours down on the city and are discarded when the weather clears up. When gathered together, Sleeth’s photographs of twisted, bent and broken umbrellas jutting out of overfull rubbish bins or lying in the rain-soaked gutter allude to the failure of mass-produced consumer goods and the excessive waste of consumer culture.

Sleeth returned yet again for an Australia Council residency over the Japanese winter of 2005–06. Among the several series he completed during this Tokyo residency was *Twelve Views of Mount Fuji* (2004–06) (see Figures 6.7–6.9). This series began during a trip in Spring 2004 and reflects Sleeth’s desire to respond to Japan’s art history and contemporary context, while carefully avoiding the tendency towards Orientalist
travelogue that often looms large in Australian representations of Japan. This series is a homage to Katsushika Hokusai’s woodblock prints *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji* (1830–34), which informed a popular tradition of visualising Japan. Hokusai’s prints pictured the iconic volcanic mountain from different perspectives and in different landscapes and seasons, framing it with clouds and foreground elements like arched bridges, snowy fields and cranes. Rather than recreating Hokusai’s images, Sleeth pictured the distant Fuji against foregrounds that could not have been envisaged by Hokusai, including a used car yard, a tangle of power lines, contemporary housing, a roller coaster and Tokyo’s extraordinary contemporary illuminated skyline.

*Kawaii Baby* (2005–06) (see Figures 6.10 and 6.11) operates at a more personal level, while maintaining Sleeth’s conceptual interest in documentary photography, seriality and consumer culture. These photographs capture the surprising encounters between Sleeth’s baby daughter and members of the public in busy Tokyo. Sleeth and his wife were initially taken aback by the way that strangers would so readily approach the little blonde-haired blue-eyed girl exclaiming ‘*kawaii*’ (cute), playing with her, adjusting her clothes and even feeding
her, sometimes without acknowledging her parents. While knowing that they meant well, Sleeth was confronted by the treatment of the infant as public property:

Japan is a very child-friendly place, which is one of the reasons we moved there, but it was quite weird, and one of the reasons I started taking these photographs was to help me deal with it.48

Taken from above and behind the little girl’s head—so her wispy blonde hair is just visible in the bottom of the shot—the photographs focus on the warm, joyous smiles and playful expressions on the faces of fellow train passengers, teenagers and office workers as they entertain the baby. Central to the appeal of these photographs is the warmth and sincerity of this interaction. In sharp contrast to the commercial use of photographs of children to transmit adult values and world views, of which Sleeth remains conscious, these people seem to utterly forget the adult world as they coo and giggle at the baby girl.49

Figure 6.11. Matthew Sleeth, Kawaii Baby #16 [Tokyo], 2006. Source: Courtesy of Matthew Sleeth/Claire Oliver Gallery (New York).

49 Matthew Sleeth, interview with Melissa Miles, 18 January 2018.
Sleeth brought together *Feet, Abandoned Umbrellas, 12 Views of Mt Fuji* and *Kawaii Baby*, along with other photographs made in Japan and elsewhere in the world, in his book *Ten Series/106 Photographs* (2007). This book is the first by an Australian photographer to be produced by the renowned American publisher Aperture in its 55-year history. In the critical response to Sleeth’s book, much of the focus is on his process of creating visual typologies and the photographer himself—his ‘obsessions’ and travels—rather than what the photographs may say about Australian engagement with Japan.\(^50\) However, when *12 Views of Mt Fuji* was included in the Queensland University of Technology Art Museum group exhibition *Zen to Kawaii: The Japanese Affect*, the reception was reframed. The Japanese art expert Gary Hickey was highly critical of how the exhibition represented impressions of Japan by Australians but failed to offer meaningful insight into Japanese culture:

> What is also apparent from the works in the *Zen to Kawaii* exhibition is that there has been little historical development in Australian understanding of Japanese culture since Japanese art travelled to the West in the late 19th century. This neglect has much to do with the dearth of any in-depth engagement with Japanese art by our educational and cultural institutions.\(^51\)

This critical objection tends to reinforce the long tradition of presenting Japan as an enigma waiting to be unravelled by the expert. The value of Australian photographic engagements with Japan must not be limited to the expectation that they will ‘explain’ Japan to a foreign audience. Rather, these photographers’ interest in confusion, misunderstanding and their place as outsiders may offer other valuable insights and perspectives.

To Sleeth, the pervasive sense of being at odds with Tokyo, of being unable to speak the language, read its street signs or understand the conversations of passers-by, allows him to gain a productive sense of presence in the moment.\(^52\) This impression of contemplation amid the

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52 Matthew Sleeth, interview with Melissa Miles, 18 January 2018.
bright lights and white noise of the city is particularly evident in Sleeth’s large-scale photographs in which he layers and heavily works over the images. Printed at 127 x 153 cm or 182 x 228 cm, the photographs are large, immersive and cinematic, and create a sense of artificiality that heightens the seductive appeal of Tokyo’s bright lights. These works build on Sleeth’s previous work with film and video and look forward to the more experimental video work to come. ‘I’m interested in found narrative’, says Sleeth, ‘but photographed in a way where everything is so controlled that it looks staged’. The spectacular winter light displays in a busy Tokyo square accentuates that sense of a staged backdrop in *Millenario Lights, Marunouchi* (2006) (see Figure 6.12). Turning away from the illuminated decorative arches and towards the lights and images reflected in the glass of nearby buildings, Sleeth creates the impression of a confusing, disorienting space that is nonetheless kept at a distance, as though being viewed on an enormous screen.

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The Western sense of Tokyo as a disorienting city goes back at least as far as Roland Barthes in *Empire of Signs* (1970), with his famous characterisation of a ‘city with an empty centre’. The city is ‘routinely described as chaotic’, observed the architectural critic Peter Popham in 1985. The idea of Tokyo as both anarchic and labyrinthine has gained traction over the decades. Significant was Toyo Itô’s multimedia installation in the *Visions of Japan* exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1991, which represented this ‘simulated city’ using a jarring mass of screens, sounds and images. Australian-based architecture historian Ari Seligmann argued that the ‘chaos trope’ has long positioned Tokyo as a territory for creative intervention, with varying implications. Chaos may be understood in light of Tokyo’s uncoordinated conglomeration of architectural styles and developments; the saturation of images, signs, billboards and neon in urban space; and the sheer enormity of the city set against thoughtful details at street level, such as neatly clipped street trees. The structure-defying layout of the city, in which nameless streets meander in all directions and are interwoven with snaking overpasses and rail lines, adds to the confusion. In Sleeth’s views of illuminated Tokyo from a Shinjuku high-rise (see Figure 6.13),

![Figure 6.13. Matthew Sleeth, North West from Shinjuku [Tokyo], 2005. Source: Courtesy of Matthew Sleeth/Claire Oliver Gallery (New York).](image)

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structures seemingly jut up against one another without any organizing principle. A comparable perspective was used in Sofia Coppola’s film Lost in Translation (2003) to reflect the sense of alienation of the American protagonists. Some Japanese and foreign architects have sought to reveal the hidden logic that sits beneath this alienating disorder—a strategy that is part of the wider tradition of shedding light on ‘inscrutable Tokyo’. However, that hidden logic is not apparent in Sleeth’s Millenario Lights, Marunouchi or North West from Shinjuku [Tokyo]. Nor was it sought. Glimpses of distinct spaces seem to collapse into one another, allowing the city to become a stimulating space for creativity.

‘Cool Japan’ in an Anxious Age

Although Sleeth was not motivated by the interests of Japanese cultural diplomacy, his work picks up on the concurrent interest in bright lights and pop culture as part of a distinctly Japanese brand of cultural ‘cool’. The American journalist Douglas McGray famously observed in 2002 how a ‘whiff of Japanese cool’ had become a selling point around the world and proposed that cool had great potential as a form of soft power:

> There is an element of triviality and fad in popular behaviour, but it is also true that a country that stands astride popular channels of communication has more opportunities to get its messages across and to affect the preferences of others.57

Inspired by the success of the United Kingdom’s ‘Cool Britannia’ campaign in the 1990s and the international explosion of South Korean K-pop music and communications technologies, Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs officially launched its ‘pop-culture diplomacy’ strategy in 2006. Two Cool Japan books were also published locally that year.58 It was hoped that Cool Japan would provide a means of countering negative regional perceptions of Japan’s international interventions, develop a new driving force for cultural exports and stimulate the local economy, which had been struggling since the rupture of the bubble

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56 Ibid., 986. Peter Popham has alluded to the city’s ‘hidden sense of order’. Rather than chaotic, it is marked by ‘a remarkably strong and simple structure’, he argued. See Peter Popham, Tokyo: The City at the End of the World (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1985), 93.
economy in the early 1990s. Everything from *manga* and *anime* to J-pop, games, cosplay and food were heralded as icons of Japanese cool. Among the government’s many ‘cool’ initiatives was the appointment of three young female fashion leaders as ‘Kawaii Ambassadors’ to travel the world promoting contemporary Japanese culture. The Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) was reorganised with a view to supporting creative industries and the rebranding of Japan. The Creative Industries Promotion Office was established in June 2010 and the Cool Japan Advisory Council began work in November that year.

In the wake of the natural and technological calamity that befell northern Honshu on 11 March 2011, Cool Japan increasingly became ‘both a defensive response against and an adaptation to globalization’. Just two months after the triple disaster of earthquake, tsunami and nuclear meltdown, the Cool Japan Advisory Council issued recommendations for the advancement of national branding and creative industries in the ‘Creating a New Japan’ proposal. The illustrated bilingual booklet *Roots of Japan*, produced as part of METI’s November 2011 initiative, ‘The Japan Mother Program’, is indicative of the way that Cool Japan was refigured. The publication explains that ‘Our “mother country” is in great need of protection, of recovery, and of nurturing the strength required to make a bold leap into the future’. The disaster was a shocking reminder that:

> We Japanese seem to have forgotten some of the critical codes that made up our mother country, Japan. In the heat of pursuing success, wealth, and industrial development, we never paused to inquire into the fact that Japan was, at once, both singular ‘Japan’ and plural ‘Japans’.

The Japan Mother Program aimed to collect, record and distribute stories about the revival of the Japanese ‘mother country’ nationally and internationally in an effort to reinvent Japan’s industry, culture and economy. *Roots of Japan* marked the start of this process by laying

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62 Ibid., 62.
‘a foundation for the re-creation of Japan’s industries and cultures—through which we will attempt to create a connection between the country’s origins and future’.63

The result was a paradox. Post-disaster, Cool Japan was an attempt to embrace globalisation and a desire to rebrand Japanese values as universal. However, it also constituted an inwardly focused ‘Japanese only’ nationalism—reiterating the ‘closed’ and supposedly unique qualities of Japanese national identity and seeking to export them as a form of global engagement.64 This embrace of internationalisation by shoring up national identity finds visual form in the 2013 photography exhibition, Cool Japan! Through Diplomats’ Eyes. Launched in 1998, the Through Diplomats Eyes’ series of annual exhibitions presents photographs of Japan taken by international diplomats and their families. The exhibitions are promoted as a means of fostering ‘cultural exchange’.65 Each year, a different theme is selected that complements the Japanese Government’s approach to cultural diplomacy. The 2013 theme ‘Cool Japan!’ was addressed by representatives of Albania, Australia, Egypt, France, Korea, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Sweden, Zimbabwe and the European Union, among others. Selected for the cover of the catalogue was the contribution by the Australian Embassy in Tokyo’s first secretary, Ciaran Chestnutt, which was also judged the winner of the Prince Takamado Memorial Prize. The photograph (see Figure 6.14) features Chestnutt’s young niece ‘enthralled by a geisha’ while walking back from Sensō-ji—Tokyo’s oldest and most popular Buddhist temple, first built in the seventh century. The temple is located in Asakusa, a principal entertainment district in the Edo era that was badly damaged by the American firebombing of March 1945, but which has regained its status as an attraction for both foreigners and Japanese alike, as much for its modernity as its tradition. Looming over the area is the world’s tallest tower, the Tokyo Skytree, which opened in 2012, standing well over 600 m tall on the city’s earthquake-prone ground. Chestnutt’s photograph captures this meeting of tradition and modernity. Shot from behind, the photograph focuses on the geisha’s elaborate silk dress and

63 Ibid., 2.
Source: Courtesy of Ciaran Chestnutt.
her decorated upswept hair, which contrast with the little girl’s simple
dress and free-flowing blonde locks. The pair seem to be in conversation,
while the slight blur of their dresses create a sense of movement. The
closed shutters of the souvenir shops on the empty, neon-lit Nakamise
shopping street provide a dramatic stage for this encounter between
ancient Japan, cool, contemporary Japan and the young international
guest who soaks it all up. Thus, Chestnutt’s photograph provides an
evocative mirror in which Japan can enjoy a distilled version of its self-
image reflected back onto itself.

Criticism of Cool Japan has been widespread. The Australian-based
Japanese media and cultural studies scholar Koichi Iwabuchi is
concerned that ‘pop-culture diplomacy goes no further than a one-way
projection and does not seriously engage with cross-border dialogue. The
Japanese case also shows that pop-culture diplomacy hinders meaningful
engagement with internal cultural diversity’. Moreover, as a form of
soft power, Cool Japan has had questionable success. Cool Japan may
promote tourism and the consumption of Japanese media cultures, but
there is no evidence that this translates into foreign policy benefits.
Steven Green looks at a BBC World Service Poll that measures global
attitudes towards other nations. He points to China, where 31 per cent
of people view Japan in mainly negative terms and only 58 per cent
view it in mainly positive terms. A Pew Research Centre survey in
2013 produced even more stark results, with 90 per cent of Chinese
having ‘unfavourable’ feelings towards Japan and just 4 per cent feeling
‘favourable’. These results suggest that it is relatively easy for people to
separate their consumption of Japanese pop culture from perceptions
of the country’s historical military misdemeanours, and that Japanese
popular culture does not necessarily make foreigners more amenable to
Japan itself.

66  Koichi Iwabuchi, ‘Pop-Culture Diplomacy in Japan: Soft Power, Nation Branding and the
Question of “International Cultural Exchange”’, International Journal of Cultural Policy 21, no. 4
67  Burgess, ‘National Identity and the Transition from Internationalization to Globalization’,
26; Yasushi Watanabe, Bansha to Gaikō: Puburikku Dipuromashii No Jidai (Culture and Diplomacy:
The Age of Public Diplomacy) (Tokyo: Chukōshinso, 2011), 89; Christopher Graves, ‘Cool Is Not
and Brian Salsberg (San Francisco: VIZ Media, 2011), 413.
The neglect of the more challenging aspects of Japan’s international history is a recurring theme in the critical commentary. Commenting on the use of the Sanrio character Hello Kitty as Japan’s Ambassador of Tourism to Taiwan, China and Korea in 2008, Christine Yano argued that the export of *kawaii* and cool helped to paper over international disputes about territory and history:

> The positioning of Hello Kitty as one face of Japan represents the power of the would-be child, at once appealing, seemingly benign, and ever in need of care and nurturance. *Kawaii* diplomacy builds upon affect and nostalgia, rather than on critical thinking. And in doing so throws a soft pink blanket upon the razor-sharp edges of history.69

Australian journalist and Kwansei Gakuin University media studies teacher Sally McLaren expressed deep concern about the post-disaster manifestation of Cool Japan, noting that Japan is simultaneously ‘sliding backwards into a nationalistic cocoon and preparing to switch the nuclear power stations back on. It’s irradiated to an unknown degree, increasingly chauvinistic and, slowly but surely, re-militarising’.70 To Burgess, Japan’s reluctance to embrace globalisation and its inward focus risks ultimately limiting the influence it hopes to achieve through soft power diplomacy.71

Despite these concerns, the Australia–Japan bilateral relationship remains strong and Australians generally have favourable attitudes to Japan. A 2017 Lowy Institute Poll found that 86 per cent of Australians trust Japan ‘to act responsibly in the world’. This result is second only to trust held in the United Kingdom (90 per cent) and was equal to Australians’ trust in Germany.72 Japan remains Australia’s second largest foreign investor, and the trade and investment partnership has been further reinforced by the Japan–Australia Economic Partnership Agreement, which began operating in 2015. Yet, questions over the potential cultural impact of Japan’s approach to cultural diplomacy remain. Iwabuchi argued that Cool Japan’s homogenisation of culture and movement away from recognising true cultural diversity brings

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to mind Edward Said’s observation that the constructions of cultures in dualistic, overly simplistic terms amounts to a form of symbolic violence.\textsuperscript{73} If pop cultural diplomacy is to work, insisted Iwabuchi, it should advance transnational connections in a manner that promotes ‘self-reflexive international conversation’ around challenging historical issues and enhances ‘intercultural understanding of cultural diversity’.\textsuperscript{74}

Working beyond the remit of official Cool Japan programs, the work of independent Australian photographers in Japan indirectly helps to further these goals. Meg Hewitt’s body of work \textit{Tokyo is Yours} (2015–17) marks her response to a prevailing sense of disquiet in post-disaster Japan. The title comes from a graffiti tag that has appeared throughout Tokyo in recent years declaring in English ‘Tokyo is Yours’. Reflecting the openness of Hewitt’s work, this phrase has at least two possible interpretations—part gift to Tokyo’s inhabitants, part confidant reclamation of the city after the disaster. \textit{Tokyo is Yours} is the product of eight short-term trips to Japan between 2015 and 2017. Spending up to 12 hours a day walking through Tokyo, this Sydney-based photographer pictured small details that captured her attention and the people that she met. Like Sleeth and Häggblom, Hewitt speaks of the sense of freedom and creativity that can come from language barriers:

\begin{quote}
I suppose being in a country like Japan—where I don’t understand most of the language—leads me to question things on a more basic level. Humanity plays out in front of me, and I seek meaning separate from words. I like to pick up the \textit{manga} at the corner store and flick through, interpreting the story from the pictures alone.\textsuperscript{75}
\end{quote}

Ironically, Hewitt’s language limitations help her to explore the city freely, to take it in without distraction and to interpret what she sees as symbols, archetypes, metaphors and potential stories.\textsuperscript{76} ‘When making the work, I looked for fantasy, the absurd and metaphor in reality. Through the photographs, I explore the layers between things, as well as memories, human connection, fear and escapism.’\textsuperscript{77}

\textsuperscript{74} Iwabuchi, ‘Pop-Culture Diplomacy in Japan’, 429–30.
\textsuperscript{76} Meg Hewitt, interview with Melissa Miles, 24 January 2018; Meg Hewitt, ‘Tokyo Is Yours’.
Figure 6.15. Meg Hewitt, *Underwater Observatory, Katsuura*, from *Tokyo is Yours*, 2016.
Source: Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 6.16. Meg Hewitt, *Tokyo is Yours*, 2015–17.
Source: Courtesy of the artist.
From the thousands of black and white photographs that Hewitt took, she selected 86 for publication in her photobook *Tokyo is Yours* (2017). One photograph focuses on a little girl looking up towards a scuba diver who cleans a window at the aging Katsuura Undersea Observatory (see Figure 6.15), while another shows a collection of worn concrete cranes found at the end of a street near an abandoned house. Many of the photographs are tightly framed so their original context is not apparent, allowing them to generate new meaning in relation to the other images. By often taking photographs at night with a flash, Hewitt uses light to isolate her subjects and absorb extraneous details into the black background. The resultant contrast creates a gritty, noir effect far removed from the highly polished and finished appearance of Sleeth’s *Marunouchi* photograph. Paths, ladders, stairs and walkways leading to destinations unknown, animals caged in a zoo, a mass of electricity pylons and eerie suburban streets at night are interspersed with tranquil landscapes and images of young love (see Figure 6.16). Sequenced and layered in the pages of the book—to be read with the spine on the left by English-speaking audiences or from the opposite direction by Japanese audiences—these photographs cumulatively create a sense of spatial and psychological compression and an underlying desire for escape.

The meltdown at the deceptively distant Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant made Tokyo’s vulnerability starkly apparent. Reflecting that Japan had come within a ‘paper-thin margin’ of a nuclear disaster, the former Prime Minister Naoto Kan remarked: ‘From a very early stage I had a very high concern for Tokyo. I was forming ideas for a Tokyo evacuation plan in my head’. Hewitt’s book alludes to this narrowly averted catastrophe and the impossibility of escape. A photograph of a building in which a maze of cracks has been crudely patched acknowledges this sense of danger quite directly. By pairing this photograph with one of a bar owner squeezing through the impossibly small doorway of her establishment, Hewitt emphasises the psychological dimension of the desire for escape. Shot from behind, only the woman’s back, shoulder and half of one leg and arm are visible, as though she is disappearing into another world. As well as heightening narrative intensity, the close physical proximity between Hewitt’s lens and her subjects creates a sense of intimacy. At times, her connection with her

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subjects is clearly evident, as in the man who held up each of his eight cats to her camera, one after the other. It is also apparent in the care that she takes when shooting. This emphasis upon personal connection may be informed by Hewitt’s admiration for the work of Masahisa Fukase, known for his deeply personal photographs of love and loss.79 Whereas this Japanese photographer’s focus was on his wife and family, Hewitt’s abiding relationship is with Tokyo, its inhabitants and its post-2011 tensions.

When exhibiting these photographs, Hewitt prints them at different scales and installs them in a way that hints at other open-ended narratives—grouping, overlaying or displacing photographs to imply the interaction of different characters, objects, scenarios and places, and to suggest different atmospheres or feelings (see Figure 6.17).80 These strategies have resonated with international audiences and in Australia. Hewitt exhibited these photographs as part of the fringe Voies Off program run in parallel to Les Rencontres d’Arles in France (2017), Sydney (2017), Canberra (2016) and regional Victoria at the Ballarat International Foto Biennale Fringe (2017), and her work has been covered in the British

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79 Meg Hewitt, interview with Melissa Miles, 24 January 2018.
80 Ibid.
Journal of Photography. Significantly, it has also generated interest in Japan. As well as being exhibited at Place M photography gallery in Tokyo, in 2018 it was shown in the Kodoji Photographer’s Bar in the legendary Shinjuku precinct the Golden Gai, a hub for Japanese photographers like Daido Moriyama and Nobuyoshi Araki since the 1960s, and a site that rarely shows the work of non-Japanese. That Hewitt has attracted interest in Japan and at home is not coincidental. To be meaningful cross-culturally, photographs need to transcend the reductive binary of ‘us’ and ‘them’. Hewitt’s work is open, allusive and complex; she examines the emotions and desires that connect human beings and keenly observes the people and places in front of her.

Hewitt and the other independent photographers discussed here reject an export model of cultural relations; they do not attempt to project carefully crafted images of their own culture to foreigners in an effort to engender sympathy or favour. Nor do they aspire to enlighten audiences back home by presenting a supposedly ‘accurate’ view of the ever-elusive ‘other’. These contemporary interpretations of one culture by another are compelling because they create a new representational language that draws attention to diverse perspectives and to new possibilities for forging cross-cultural connections.
