

Contact, Impact and Indexicality:

An Alternative History of Japanese Photography

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Western photography of the 19th century has developed from the desire to create images that represent the world, its real view, and its physical reflection through the apparatus of the camera. This perception led to the development of representation of portraits, objects, and landscapes, as the main subjects of classical photography, its continuity and relationship with the history of Western style painting and the belief in the reality of the physical world.

In Japan, however, even though photography cameras arrived from the West as early as 1848, there were several image-making practices that existed in Japan prior to the arrival of photography that contributed to the language of the new medium. Therefore, the new introduced apparatus was taken into the Japanese sphere of representation, which initially was based on *impact* and *gravity* – rather than vision and mimesis, as was implied by the long tradition of Western style painting and photography. The influence of these traditions, practices, processes, and images was created over the preceding centuries, and as soon as photography was part of the visual medium present in Japan in the late 19th century, experimentations with the new medium, based on the local knowledge, had become ubiquitous. During that period, several Japanese researchers and practitioners aided each other in the process of making images that relate to the newly introduced medium, through the practices of the past.

In my presentation, I shall refer to two traditional methods of representation, and their respective influence on the language of photography – *ink painting* and *print making* (including the practice of *silhouette* shaping). Both are based on the idea of *leaving a trace through contact*, which can be easily translated to the indexical registration by the light over a light-sensitive paper substance, or other flat surfaces such as glass, copperplate, silk screen, etc. Based on my previous research I will argue that the two methods influenced the practices of photographic images based on *contact* and *impact* leaving the indexical trace of presence as the final mark, rather

than the drive for representation and vision as the core values of the photographic image.

The research of Kinoshita Naoyuki in the 1980s and 1990s, had already revealed the interesting link between print-making and photography in Japan: Kinoshita has shown that the term selected for the translation of “photography” to Japanese, *Shashin* (写真), appears in many printed images of the 19th century, and was paired with the terms *Shasei* (写生) and *Shajitsu* (写実) to indicate the practices of “drawing from life,” and “realism,” respectively. Maki Fukuoka’s research into the genealogy of the term *Shashin* and its relationship to the early research of pharmacology and herbology in Japan, when scientists wanted to prove the presence of certain herbs known from Chinese and Dutch sources, that needed to be prove as existent in Japan. Once the plant was discovered, it was smeared with ink, and printed directly by press onto a paper, as a proof of presence in Japan. These prints were called *Shashin*, and in a curious and interesting way, this name was later attached to the practice of photography by Ito Keisuke, who was one of the advisors to the Meiji government in the process of modernization, who was recruited to include in the Japanese language terms as a translation/ adaption of the newly imported practices and technologies coming from the West. Ito thought that the plant prints of the Japanese herbalists were very similar to William Fox Talbot and Anna Atkins’ prints, and therefore, borrowed the term from its pharmacological context into the present meaning as “photography,” created through the idea of contact and impact was the source of the photographic image. As for the ink painting tradition, it was always based on *the impact of the body*, through the *contact* of the brush with the (paper) surface, hence, leaving the ink mark as a trace, a reminiscent of the action taken, is often associated with the idea of *indexicality* in photography.

In my presentation I shall discuss the work of 19th century photographers, such as Yokoyama Matsusaburō, Esaki Reiji and Shiina Sukemasa alongside modern and contemporary photographers such as Kawada Kikuji, Yamazaki Hiroshi, Ijima Kaoru, Yokota Daisuke and Noguchi Rika – all of them engaged in some form of photography which is based on *impact*, *contact*, *indexicality* and *anti-photography* as the main apparatus of their image making.

Images to be discussed in my presentation come from a long tradition of plant images, as well as astronomical photography, through the images of celestial objects, such as the sun, the moon and the stars in the sky. I will show the early photographs of Yokoyama, including the imprints of plants on photographic paper, as well as his images of silhouettes that work as an in-between state of *contact* between light and surface. Yokoyama image of an orchid's silhouette and his photograph of a Morning Glory as a contact print, clearly indicate how photography had corresponded to earlier practices in Japan. Esaki's images of the moon phases which he took in the 1870s, is a precursor to the long tradition of celestial photography that developed in Japan. Shiina's images of the sun eclipse which are organized in the tradition of moon paintings from the Edo period, is another important example for the continuity from traditional composition to contemporary practices. Kawada, Yamazaki and Ijima, all engaged in different modes of celestial photography, while Yokota and Noguchi created images that question the medium and its surface of contact.

Keywords:

Japanese Photography

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Celestial Photography

Plants in photography

Images:



Figure 1 Yokoyama Matsusaburō, Morning Glory, contact print

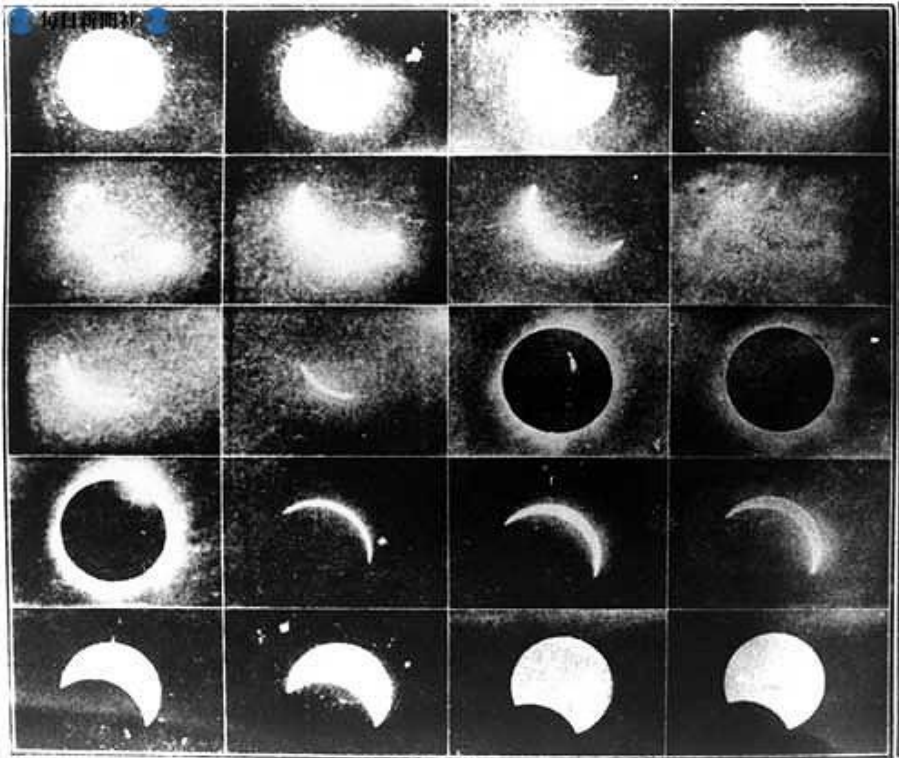


Figure 2 Esaki Reiji, Moon Phases, 1872



Figure 3 Injima Kaoru, One Sun (Mumbai, India), 2009



Figure 4 Yokota Daisuke, *Sediments*, color photograph, 2010