

Essay by Mariko Takeuchi

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Introduction

In Japanese, the word for “photograph” is “shashin”. It is made up of two ideograms, “sha” meaning “to reproduce” or “reflect” and “shin” which means “truth.” The Greek etymology of the word “photograph” is to write (graphein) with light (photos). Therefore, in the Japanese mind, the process itself consists in capturing the truth, or the essence of the matter and “making a copy” of it on a surface. Consequently, the result will always contain a certain element of truth. Since the advent of photography, this way of seeing things has become commonplace throughout the world, but in very few languages is the concept expressed with such clarity. If we

take as a premise the idea that Japanese photography is the fruit of a multitude of reactions, ranging from empathy to mistrust, to this process of “reproducing the truth,” it becomes easier to gain a better understanding of its astonishing diversity.

Consider Japanese photography as a whole and it becomes evident that a large number of artists tend to express feelings of incomprehension and ambiguity towards reality and the world rather than attempt to decrypt it and objectively analyze it. In his “Empire of Signs,” Roland Barthes remarked that Japanese culture gained its liberty by freeing itself from the meaning of the signs it contains. Up to a point, this can be said about photography. Photography is not a conclusion but a perpetual questioning. In that sense, Barthes got it right when he later compared photography to the art of Haiku in “La Chambre Claire.”



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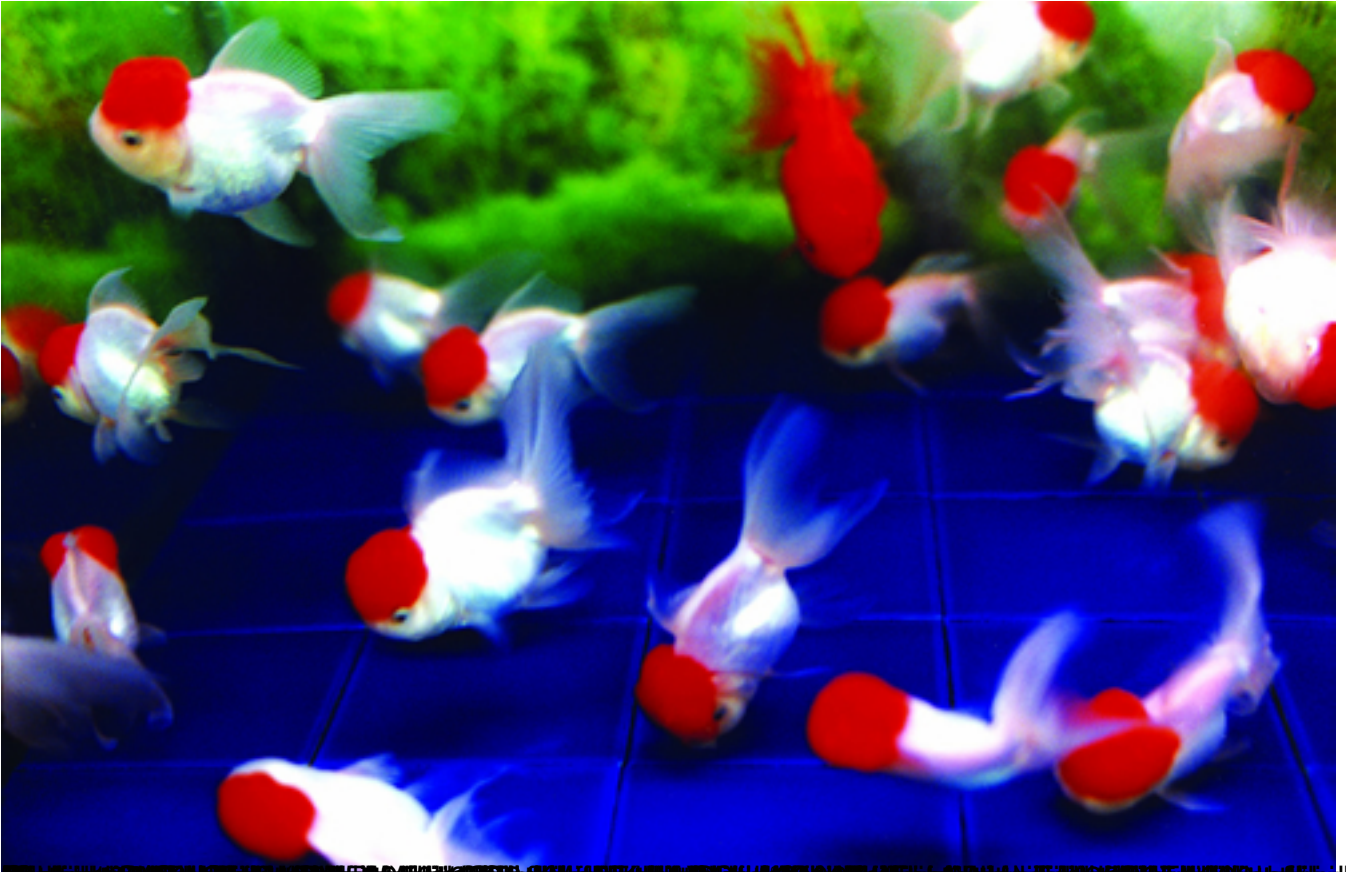






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