

A Reflection on the Social Being Called Mass Media

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Mass media is the most powerful communication mechanism which dominates the thoughts and emotions of our time. It turns people into a mass in which they are no more individuals. To put it another way, in the operation of this mechanism, people are disciplined to be the masses who possess the modern man's thinking and feeling, shared by almost all men, not individuals with their own creative ones. Yoo Young-wun's works present a critical reflection on mass media which controls our consumption society. The artist awakens the viewers to the true nature and attributes of mass media whose function lies in the expanded reproduction of what everyone already knows, or the this special kind of public sphere which manipulates and processes what people think and feel in consumer society.

His character sculptures using printed images and texts capture the social being called mass media as a physical entity. They began with matter, that is, prints. The artist sees prints like magazines and leaflets as the materials representing mass media and uses them as the skin of his sculptural pieces. His first step was to look the other side of the arbitrary images imposed by mass media, which he called the 'counterattack of media.' This sarcasm of the fictitious fantasy of popular images continued for five years. And it also made the audience feel anew that these paper prints are still the massive media: unlike immaterial mechanisms including digital devices and the internet, the old print media still holds sway over our daily communication.

The print media played a decisive role in forming modern society. Texts and images mass-reproduced by it contributed to the formation of the public sphere in the modern sense more than any other. In that it regularly and constantly provided information of the same quality and quantity for whoever was able to contact it, the print media is the best communication mechanism invented by modern society. This media exerted such influence that it can be said to create the modern ear. Though we witnessed the advent of the age of the second media, caused by the digital and the internet revolution, we are still surrounded by the power of the first media such as prints. Probably, it is because of the familiarity of the print media as well as the use of popular icons that Yoo's works make a convincing appeal. In short, the artist considers mass media of the second media age with the material mechanism of the first.

His attempt to capture the social being of mass media as a physical entity is realized through the material being of prints. He has persistently made a relation among the identity of characters, magazine images and texts. When producing a sculpture of Kim Jong-il, the artist prints the images or texts relating to this North Korea's leader and covers the surface with them. Likewise, the sculpture of the former president of South Korea, Park Jeong-hee is put on with the texts and images of him. As he intended to ruminate over the meaning of the materiality of magazine texts when he made these magazine characters for the first time, he still uses the texts and images associated with each character when he folds papers for the sculpture's skin. His decision to create the image of Kim Jong-il with texts about Kim, and that of Park Jeong-hee with those about Park is not only the promise with himself to fulfill his initial idea but also the premise of trust with which his works can evoke our sympathy.

By arranging his individual sculptures as in installation works, the artist sets up particular situations. He modifies the sizes or surfaces of them depending on each situation sometimes and other times, represents power relation by making certain configurations of them. In the first section, the idols of American popular culture and politicians of the Korean peninsula are put upon pedestals out of respect to them. Here, the audience meet Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe, Minnie Mouse, Park Jeong-hee, and Kim Jong-il. Standing on pedestals with columns in ancient Greek architectural style, they have their own characteristic pose, showing the false images fabricated by media. Before them, the "blowfish man" kneels down and pays homage and tribute to these heroes. Yoo depicts all of them sarcastically by making them have the body proportion of character dolls. This goes for Centaur, Guan Yu, Elf, Mermaid and others appearing in the second section. These characters who undermine the stereotypes of the images too familiar to us are both intimate and strange.

The third section features Catwoman, Simpson, Hulk, Spider Man, Snow White, Wonder Woman, and the Eye of Media. These characters which were gushed out by Western media and made widely known through films, dramas, and animations are transformed and distorted by the hand of this artist. And the "Eye of Media" stands there watching them all. This 'media man' with twelve eyes is looking at the six characters. This work seems to convey most clearly what the artist wants to argue about media. While most of his works are meta-characters, that is, parodies of existing characters, some are created by himself on the basis of his own idea and drawing. The eyes of the "Eye of Media" all have different expressions. Staring fiercely or looking askance, they show the

nature of media: though it may seem to give only a short glance and pass over, or look the other way, media stubbornly digs into daily life. The combination of gaze and glimpse as the way media works is expressed in this work most vividly and powerfully.

It is because Yoo sees the world in a critical and coherent manner and make efforts to maintain such attitude that his works can be properly called the work of art, even though he appropriates popular, ready-made images. He began with criticizing emotions and recognitions infused from outside: to subvert all that are formed as a result of discipline. This is what an artist ought to do. The utterance of an artist who started from the skepticism against what he knows and feels acquires a critical message. In the case of Yoo, his reflection on the social being called mass media is also premised on a kind of critical message. However, his message does not offer an answer. Instead, he only cast a question. So, he asks: in what way do the heroes of our age have ideal image of heroes and why do we agree with such image manipulation?

By presenting a condensed version of his selected previous works, this exhibition also has the meaning of preparing for moving toward the next step. If what he has shown were the parody of existing images, his future work would be to realize the new characters in his drawings. Possibly, the works of the past few years might have been a desperate measure to find common ground shared by the public, as a visual artist who has to resort to the exhibition media that is less influential than overwhelmingly powerful mass media. So far, Yoo have assumed quite indirect metaphors, rather than made direct utterances. His image manipulation is not a criticism founded on negation, but one as objective distancing. The new characters will reveal his subjective feeling more distinctly. Now this is the time to embody the entirely new ideas confined to drawing books.

By giving visual forms to mass media as a social entity, Yoo makes us aware of that it is very concrete and substantial physical being. His works are the materialization of contents distributed mainly by the broadcasting media. Art delivers a message more clearly by passing through the process of material communication. And we know too well that we can never easily overcome this limitation of art as matter, even though we ceaselessly try to do it. Or rather, we might feel assured by agreeing to the fact that art explicitly translates the ideological world into the material, or makes the uncertain manifest itself as what exists positively. To produce and consume signs is carried out equally by mass media and the exhibition media. In that the genuine object of the exhibition media is to bring about communication between matter called the work of art and the

viewers' appreciation, his character sculptures require us to broaden the horizon of interpretation in order that their metaphor can be understood more profoundly, or to be accurate, more appropriately.