

Hein-Kuhn Oh

Alain Sayag, Curator at the Centre Pompidou (1972-2008)

Is it still possible to really look at a photograph? There are too many. Wherever we look - urban walls, newspapers and magazines, the screens of all the machines we use – images prevail. What it is that will cause one of these images to linger, to catch our eyes, to attract our attention and possibly to get imprinted in our memory? What do we have to do to find a "good image - as we say in the professional jargon"?

Looking for the "good" image desperately is no a futile, impossible, sterile task, unlike that of the poor man described by Diderot in a letter to his friend Sophie Volland: "what a silly activity this poor man is leading, who rather than devoting his time to a charming presence in a room of his house, spends the day going from the attic down to the cellar and then from the cellar up to the attic".

A hundred years ago, photographers would take a few hundreds of photographs in their life time. With the advent of modern photography, they increased to a few tens of thousands, then a few hundreds of thousands. Thanks to digital photography, a million images is no longer an exceptional performance; any reporter, any amateur who claims to be enlightened is now afflicted with this deadly contraction of the forefinger denounced with much humour and force by Henri Cartier - Bresson. It is less of an issue when they claim to be artists since the art dealers – eager to valorize their production – will constrain them to obey the law of the market by increasing the size of the prints and lower the number of photographs. When it comes to the professional photographers, the image will gain value only as much as it flags an event and it will last as long as that event echoes in the collective memory. The technical quality of the image is irrelevant, as was the case for those images taken by an amateur with a mobile phone during the terrorist attack in the London tube, which displayed all the flaws and defects associated with the photographic process. Sometimes, an image displays all the formal perfection of a carefully composed scene, as was the case for the famous 'Algerian Madonna (Madone Algérienne)' taken by Hocine for the Agence France Presse on September 23, 1993. But what really matters is that these photographs convey the visible trace of an event. They invite us to take part, fortunately remotely in the cozy peacefulness of our daily life, in History in the making.

Yet, nothing is as fragile as these testimonies. The emphatically so-called "great photographers" can boast repeatedly that "they were there", that they took risks to bring these images back. Capa was on the frontline with the Republican soldiers opposite the Spanish nationalists; Brassai had to work out a deal with the louts and pimps of the "grand Albert" gang to be able to take his images of 'Paris at night (Paris de nuit)'. But such an attitude is in fact nothing more than a posture which hides a very different reality. The image of this soldier shot to death on the Cordoba frontline, in Andalucia, on September 5, 1936, still fuels controversies. Most probably it has no more authenticity than the image showing the "live photograph of the death of a French soldier in Verdun in 1917" found in many historical books on WWI. In the latter case, it is nothing more

than a reconstitution made in 1928 for a film by Léon Poirier: *Verdun, vision d'histoire* (Verdun, vision of History), the material implausibility of which does not hold against any serious scrutiny. Likewise, commonsense will rapidly reveal that the images of Paris at Night have been fabricated. Nothing is easier than faking a photographic image. Technically at first, but also at a deeper level since within the infinite number of possible images at a given moment in time, we choose only predetermined images. They are nothing more than mental images that have materialized. They are only reconstructions which make sense in a continuous narrative process. By nature, photography is a deceiver. It captures death or life on an equal footing and gives them equal reality. One day, as we were looking at the large books in which he accumulates photographs which form his personal diary, David Hockney pointed to me that the grizzly bear I found so threatening was in fact a stuffed animal in one of the rooms of Anchorage airport. More recently, commenting on the image of a reared up horse - a marble sculpture devoid of its base and immobile in a somber park - Sarah Moon declared that: "the miracle of photography stems from the fact that it gives life to inanimate objects".

The works of Hein-Kuhn Oh must be looked at in the context of this improbable and fascinating space. In his series dedicated to the riots of May 18, 1980, the demonstrators occupy the streets and the squares of the city of Gwangju¹. The resolute expressions of the students, the perplexity of the military, the traces of fight are clearly visible, and could be the historical snapshots taken from a contemporary History schoolbook. They are, however, nothing more than staged scenes taken during the shooting of a film. Intended for the picture rails of a gallery or a museum, these images have actually gained value, the secret alchemy of art has transformed them from images loaded with fugitive and circumstantial realism to symbol-carrying images, since from the apparent disorder of things, in the confusion of reality, Hein-Kuhn takes care to



Jung-hyeon Lee, A Petal, 1996

extricate a universal, permanent and unchanged element. Here the image functions as a vision of the mind, within a carefully constructed space, and it is not an object found and retrieved from the chances of his peregrinations. The apparent ingenuity of these images - further reinforced by the natural look of the improvised actors - makes them perfectly plausible. This practice challenges reportage, as it rests on a reconstruction of reality which seeks to give these images an exemplary, symbolic value. In his "conversations with Picasso", Brassai confided to Picasso about the need to explain this "claim for resemblance that an artist may demand. A painter must observe nature but never confuse it with painting. It can only be translated into painting by means of signs. But a sign cannot be invented. There must be strong attempts to resemblance to produce a sign. As far as I am concerned, surreality is nothing else, and has never been anything else, but this deep resemblance beyond the shapes and colours under which things are being presented.

In the *Ajumma*ⁱⁱ series, space and light are accomplices of this transmutation which turns an image into a work of art. Hein-Kuhn toys with it as a master as shown in the first images of the hot districts of Seoul which unfortunately he does not show much. In this series, the frontal capture of the subject, the brutality of the flash, grant to the subject an ambiguous and fascinating presence. But it is all a fake: the eye hides behind glasses with disproportionate frames, the make up is all too perfect, the hairdo carefully disheveled, the smile obviously forced. Everything is ugly: the jewelry is too big, the shine of a gold lamé or the flowers of a blouse, even the embroideries of a traditional costume display the stiffness of industrial garments. Yet, there is nothing pathetic nor ridicule in these



Jung-suh Yun, July 19. 2007. 102x77cm

mature figures. Hein-Kuhn makes us visually aware of the anxiety contained in the Korean society which had gone through a willful and ostentatious westernization and prosperity. These overfed, feigned "chic"-donning women, express a social order filled with a vivid anxiety which transpires through the pores of their faces. We have no indication of the socio-economic context of their lives, we know nothing of their family context; their only role is to reveal the artifacts of a rigid and formalistic society. The revelation of this obvious fact is made stronger by the fact that the subject only exists in the limited space animated by light. The isolation of the human figure thus becomes a metaphor of the position of women in the Korean society. And these closed, charmless faces do not convey a very optimistic vision of the contemporary society. This is also what interests him in the recent series of large colour studio portraits of very young girls. Behind the heavy

mask of the cosmetic products copiously applied, what is being showed is the clumsiness, the ingenuousness of these adolescent girls. It is as if these young women were not yet able to hide, as their elders do, this anxiety that seems to corrode the whole Korean society.

Hence, the same artistic strategy is put into play in the two series. Yet, in my total ignorance of the Korean society, I believed for a long time that *Ajumma* was a surname transformed into a generic term before realizing that it identifies a far more complex social concept. The term does not so much make sense due to the aspect of the subject or to its position in the society, but rather due to a certain social consciousness and to the strategy that applies to it. Hein-Kuhn invites us to read it, through a real social anthropology, but it is him and him alone, the author of these images, who defines this classification and decides to grant to each of his models an exemplary value. For what he is looking for is not so much these women themselves as much as the accumulation through which they construct their social personality. Brassai wrote that "photography consists in allowing things to talk; it is a need to reach the resemblance within a form of

absolute. Whatever we do, photography cannot escape its fate; it remains a black and white, two-dimensional transcription of the world. To become a *definitive image*, Brassai insisted, it must obey the unchangeable rules of art, i.e. the balance between the living thing and the shape ... classical balance, since the artistic ambition pushes to produce something striking using the trivial and conventional".

ⁱ *Gwangju* : A city in the southern part of Korea. A massive democratization protest occurred in it to denounce the autocracy of Chun Doo-hwan regime on May 18, 1980, and the conflict against excessive forces suppressing the protest caused thousands of casualties.

ⁱⁱ *Ajumma*: a term to generally call middle-aged women in Korea. It is sometimes used as a colloquial expression to belittle or make fun of women or compare them younger women. Hein-kuhn Oh made a series of photographic portraits in 1999 under the title of 'Ajumma', in which Oh captured various looks of middle-aged Korean women.