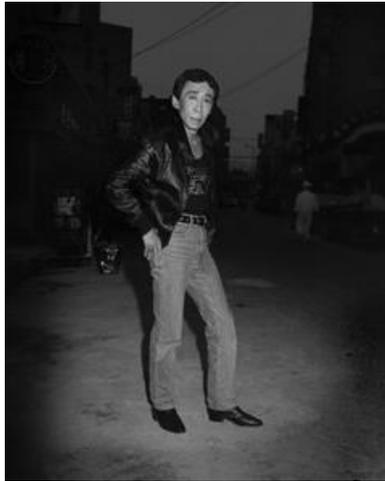


*People of the Twentieth Century*¹ — a series of works by August Sander (1876-1964) in which he photographed people from all spectrums of life in Germany during the early 20th Century— has gained an unparalleled position within contemporary photography, and not solely because of the quality of the portraits. It is perhaps because the series, with its meticulous planning and systematic categorization, reveals Germany's societal structure of the time. Since Sander, we have tended to look more closely at the details of a person's appearance — such as the clothes they are wearing—or at the backgrounds surrounding them, rather than struggling to see within the figure who has been photographed. We also began to give more attention to works as a series, rather than seeing each photograph in isolation. This is also the case with the work of one of Korea's exemplary photographers, Hein-kuhn Oh, who has photographed people for about twenty years. While Sander intended to portray cross-sections of the whole of Germany society through its different ranks, Oh reveals a snapshot of Korean society in each series of his works, by illuminating a group of people based on his personal interests.



Twist Kim, Actor/Singer, from Itaewon Story series, 1993



Bul-yi Kim, Actor, Angels alley in Itaewon, from Itaewon Story series, 1993

Some of the subjects that have gained his attention can be found in works such as *Itaewon Story*, *Kwangju Story*, *Ajumma*, *Girl's Act*, and *Cosmetic Anxiety*. Among them are a variety of people living within the Itaewon region², where the artist has long lived; actual residents and unknown actors appearing within the same scene at a film's location³; ajumma, middle-aged married women

¹ Sander's *People of the Twentieth Century* (*Menschen des 20 Jahrhunderts*) is a series of photographic portraits made up of 45 portfolios with 12 pieces, classified into 7 sections: the Farmer, the Skilled Tradesman, the Woman, Classes and Professions, the Artists, the City, and the Last People (the homeless, veterans, etc.) A selection of 60 pieces, *Face of Our Time* (*Antlitz der Zeit*) was released as the first of Sander's books in 1929.

² Having prospered as a major entertainment district for the US armed forces in Korea since the Korean War, Itaewon became a very popular area for shopping and entertainment among local and foreign visitors, with a lot of fusion restaurants, pubs, venues for entertainment, etc. The artist photographed a variety of people living in Itaewon such as actors, singers, waiters, gays, DJs, etc with their everyday backgrounds in 1997.

³ This series titled *Kwangju Story* features a confusion created between reality (the location) and unreality (the film) by taking a photo of nameless actors and Kwangju citizens mixed within the same frame. The works were made when Oh was working on the poster and still cuts for *A Petal* (1996), a film based on the Kwangju Democratization Movement.

who are often referred to as the ‘third sex’ in Korea; and female high school students, girls whose ages are hard to guess because of their make-up. Even though they represent a large part of society, they are subjects who are often treated as insignificant, never allowed to stand at the centre. As an observer, the artist’s gaze is inquisitive and yet at the same time sympathetic to their sensitivity. As such, Oh’s photographs stand between two different realms, and ‘duality’ is an appropriate word to use when engaging with his work. Since majoring in photography and film, Oh’s work experience has ranged from fine art photography to film-related work; the patterns of his work wavering between reality (documentary) and unreality (directing). With the social position of people drawing his attention, his perspective toward them stands ambivalently on the border.

When he takes pictures of women, the duality of his perspectives toward females is particularly notable. While seeing them – the ajumma and the girls – with a gaze that appears typical of most men in Korea, a more careful look into his works allows us to recognize that Oh is apparently in line with a female perspective rather than a male one. For example, while dealing with an unusual roughness that is characteristic of the unique group of Ajumma created by our patriarchal society, their bittersweet humor is never missed. Girls who are often objectified in terms of sexuality and—unlike boys of the same age—forced to take on stereotypical images, are portrayed with notions of emotional unease and unstable identities. Like this, Oh approaches his female subjects, watching them objectively, yet creating a space that is sympathetic to them. The particular tension brought up by this ambiguity is said to be the most powerful drive in Oh’s portraits.



Ajumma wearing a tiger fur print dress, March 27,
from Ajumma series, 1997



Two Ajummas 1. March 26, from Ajumma series, 1997

For the last few years, Oh has focused his work on teenage girls. His artist’s statement begins with the dictionary definition of the English word ‘ambivalent’, and so the girls in his portraits might be seen to have a significance that derives from the fact that they are standing as ambiguous beings, without a fixed position, as neither children or women. They are still intrinsically children, with a limited view of the world around them, but because might rashly be seen as women because of their appearances. Between these two conflicting points, their personalities drift and their identities are elusive. Oh has been struggling to capture the sense of anxiety derived from the obscure ontological position of teenage girls in our cities.

The starting point, *Girl's Act* (2003) is a series of black and white photographs taken of girls wearing uniforms, sharing similar expressions and poses. Unlike his previous works, which had an extreme contrast between the subjects and their backgrounds, these works are characterized by a depth of subtlety in their grey tone, thereby highlighting the vagueness and restlessness of the figures. The emotional shakiness of this period of ambivalence however, is recognizable in each individual photograph, though it repeats throughout the entire series, and along with the subject and form, it can be seen as a regular pattern. By employing the vocabulary of an encyclopedic book of girls, and using the girls as subjects for a kind of typological photo, he uses a hidden idea to reveal issues about a society that demands formalized images and social positioning from teenage girls. Mass media such as television compel them to take on the supposed girly expressions and poses seen in the images of entertainers. In reality, girls without established value systems are unknowingly exposed and tend to learn how to act. Girls spending their teens in Korea are often deprived of opportunities to affirm their own personalities, and because of this their appearances become impersonal enough to be able to form a type of encyclopedic book. It is as if they were in an encyclopedic animal or plant guidebook, with entirely objectified results. As seen from the inherent characteristics of typological photographs, which address the unseen societal structures behind the visible typological elements, Oh's girl photographs address a social reality in which girls unconsciously act like girls beyond their cookie cutter expressions and poses.

Oh's photographs of girls have gone through an array of changes in media and genre, as with the recently exhibited *Cosmetic Anxiety*⁴ (2007~2008). This project, which began with the work entitled *Cosmetic Girls*, is a series of very large and colorful photographs of teenage girls, shot from head to toe with their faces made-up, hairdos, clothes, gestures, attitudes and parts of bodies within a constant frame⁵. After his usual black and white pieces, he made his first attempt with color using a high quality digital camera and the resulting super-sized prints—the largest of which is approximately 200 x 260cm—overwhelm the viewer with the stark detailing of their faces and bodies. Girls within the photos are seemingly both children and adults—it is hard to guess their ages, an uncertainty is felt through eyes that wear colored lenses, while the clumsily done make-up reveals indescribable nervousness. These can be said to be signs of immaturity disguised behind a mask of maturity, as if they were unripe fruits that had been artificially ripened, with their skin appearing to be properly colored, yet the insides still sour. They do a lot of things to make themselves appear as adults, such as using color lenses, color makeup, dying their hair, using hair extensions (extending short hair by clipping on fake hair), applying manicures, pedicures, tattoos, etc. However, these attempts are not skillful enough to hide signs of their immaturity, such as acne, crudely applied makeup, flushed cheeks, blood-shot eyes (because

⁴ While *Cosmetic Girls* was titled with a stress on faces wearing makeup, *Cosmetic Anxiety* is a title for the series which was expanded in terms of media and genres.

⁵ This series, features pictures of 138 teenage girls who agreed to be photographed out of more than 500 approached from elementary schools and high schools in Seoul. It has the characteristics of a kind of sociological report, revealing slightly different styles in makeup and fashion in each region. However, it is more appropriate to understand the series as a work in its entirety rather than noticing the differences.

of the lenses), cuts and scrapes on the body, or socks with cartoon images that don't go with the rest of what they're wearing. Because of this, they remain ambiguous. There is also another reason that their makeup or other facets of their appearances make it harder to see the girls within the photographs as the girls that they really are. Some of the girls register neither the traces of their pasts nor the traits of their personalities. Their faces are alarmingly impassive, holding neutral gazes revealing nothing within. As this implies an absence of identity, the artist warns of a perilous state in which our adolescent children are left exposed. It is quite likely that this sheds light on a reality in our society in which they do not show their inner selves, or are even deprived of internal space.



Han-na Yu, age 17, from *Girl's Act* series, 2003

Most of the girls in the work shield their private parts with either folded hands or hands placed between the thighs. These postures have not come because he has requested it, but have come about on their own after the one and a half hours spent taking photographs. Perhaps they already perceive how they look and how they should act. Oh drew his attention to a sense of anxiety and sexual nervousness found in the attitudes of their postures, and some of the photographs repeat similar poses by emphasizing them through manipulating the angle that they have been taken from. To highlight the social gaze that objectifies girls as a kind of commodity, Oh asked them to sit on a pedestal covered in fabric, with a colored background behind them, as if they were ornamental items. What is noteworthy here is the choice of background color, which reveals his pursuit of a subtle sensation, by considering the character of each girl, rather than the neutralization that happens in generic typological photos. This suggests that Oh is striving in his attempts for his own kind of typology, instead of merely following the given rules of German typology.

In other words, the two series dedicated to girls, and the series of *Ajumma*, have in common an altered typological format that focuses on the subtleties in difference between each figure, as well as focusing on the subject of women who have come to occupy a specific position in Korean society. While taking pictures of *Ajumma* in a similar format, Oh was careful not to miss the personalities and expressions that were revealed, so as to draw attention to their oddness. Instead of merely repeated individual photos, in *Girl's Act* he developed a type of series that highlighted their vulnerable sensibilities—unlike a graduation album which usually reflects the characteristics of an entire high school, prioritizing the group instead of the individual. When he reached

Cosmetic Anxiety, Oh had had access to existing typological portraits such as those by Thomas Ruff⁶, and with an intentional transformation, discernable changes could be seen. While Ruff attempted to isolate the subjects' feelings and personalities as much as possible by using an achromatic background, Oh's photographs take a similar format within an entire series, but he captures each girl's anxiety and unease without excluding his own subjectivity in his view toward them. To do this, he sometimes varied formats⁷ within a series of work, with large, high resolution photographs leading the viewer to feel as if they are seeing the girls up close, as well as placing different background colors on each figure depending on his interpretation of their attitude, or creating diptychs out of contrasting photos. This led from his idea that a specific group of people might be photographed for a series of work, but that they should not be objectified like the subjects in other typologies.

In this way, Oh's portraits are of duality and ambivalence. The repetitive format he uses for a subject, and subsequently their latent themes, are in keeping with typology, but he does not abandon the specific characteristics of each figure or his subjective approach to them. This has come from his dual desire to both draw attention to the problems that our societal structure places on the subject group, as well as to reveal the subtle differences among individuals. Throughout all of his work, Oh is someone on the border, standing between two different realms. As seen in the girls that he photographs, his work has a premise of ambiguity and unease. If the certain and stable aren't able to give tension and impulse, two inherent attributes of contemporary art, it would be this duality that Oh should continue to capture.

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⁶ Thomas Ruff, one of the most exemplary German typological photographers, is well known for *Portrait* (1986), in which he used an identical format and asked for totally deadpan, neutral expressions from his family and friends.

⁷ The three regular formats of *Cosmetic Girls*—ID photograph, entire body shot and lower body shot—taken seated on a pedestal in the studio, were replaced by a variety of formats such as standing instead of sitting, using real life situations as backgrounds, photographing two people instead of one, etc.