

Seung Woo Back's works reveal strange moments, or ironies of life. Though his works start from photography, he crosses the boundary of photography, film, and contemporary art. *Real World I* (2004-2006) and *Blow Up* (2005-2007) unveil strange situations and environments that we encounter in reality. *Real World II* (2006-2008) and *Utopia* (2008-2011) display surreal situations reconstructed by the artist. The surreal situation here does not mean a display of reality as it is, but means a world reconstructed by the artist. He cut the films of his reconstructed photos and sends them to different regions around the world to print them by the same instruction. With the same instruction, however, the results show differences. In *Real World*, Back constructs an artificial landscape that he created in a real world landscape. *Blow Up* is composed of enlarged parts of censored photos. *Utopia* shows reconstructed landscape, which was originally constructed by an ideological motif. More recent works include the photos printed in different regions following an identical instruction with the same data, and three-dimensionalization of the reconstructed images of existing buildings. Seung Woo Back's works are not the photography that show the reality as it is. Instead, his works are actions that reveal concealed images, extending to landscapes constructed by unreal elements in reality and to works that present the images of fabricated buildings in real space.

Back raises questions about the realness of images and tries to pervert it. His works show how fact or reality presented by photographic images can easily be fabricated and appropriated. In *Memento* (2011), he reorganizes private photographs that he collected from other people. He creates a mix of images made between Monday and Sunday in *Seven Days* (2011). Making use of the characteristics of photography as a medium, Back approaches contemporary art by a photographic language.

The current interview was started during the preparation stage for Back's exhibition in May 2011. The following text is edited from questions and answers from a number of meetings with the artist.

## Real World

Sunjung Kim (KIM): Your works are generally defined to be about 'reality/unreality' and 'fact/fiction.' I wonder if you mind these terms in your working process, or the critics simply put those terminologies. It might be because the terms can have multiple meanings rather

than accurately defined, but it would be still good to know how you think about the meanings and whether they have influence in your working process.

Seung Woo Back (BACK): My works are seemingly standing in between the real/unreal, reality/unreality and the visible/invisible. I tried to differentiate them in my approach to the photographic medium. It was because I had a complex that I majored in photography (though sometimes it is a merit), but more than that, it was a realization that I had at a certain moment during my stay in the UK, that it would be meaningless if the photography of 1990s and 2000s is just about documenting what are visible.

KIM: In what way is it meaningless?

BACK: It can be meaningful to find what is visible, document and deliver the situation through a medium of photography. But it does not have such a value to me. For example, when you do a research for taking photos of a certain subject, isn't it true that you find tens of thousands of related images already roaming around? Watching those kinds of things happening, it feels somewhat like shooting a water gun while in the water, even if I create a bit more stylish or better photographic images. This is a vague explanation, but that might just be a finding of some images. I so thought that I should set an arbitrary theme rather than looking for it, that I should set up a scenario and then collect the needed images. That's why *Real World I* (2004-2006) came first to public. I had 6 or 7 other series that I was working on at the time when I was working on it.

KIM: Other than *Real World I*, among the series you worked on during that period, you only presented *Real World II*, a series where toy soldiers are placed in certain spaces. What are the other series?

BACK: *Chosun* (2002) is a series of portrait photos where the subjects are wearing attires of Chosun in 1500s, and published in a German magazine. *108 Anguish* (2002) is a series with 108 hired extras to play 108 types of occupations.

KIM: I haven't heard of such works. But is there any reason for not presenting the works even though you planned and worked on them?

BACK: The reason I mentioned these works are, I happened to see my works as a whole while studying in the UK, and I found there's a point that penetrates my works. I always compare two circumstances. The real and unreal, for example. I tell through a contrast between the two, but I realized that I tell in reverse order, not telling directly about what is

seen. I thought that I would create certain stories I'm interested in, if that reverse order constitutes my position. Thus the fact that *Real World* was the first series presented to public, it was a bit of a planned move. That work was the easiest one to read, and I considered the visibility of the work at a moment that I first deliver my works to the public. In any case, I assume I set up what I would tell before I start working. The terminologies used by the critics also seem to be what I've intended.

KIM: You said you decide your concepts before start working, and want to reverse what is visible and tell a story following the decided concepts. What specifically are the things that are seen and the story you want to tell in reverse?

BACK: I'm not sure of proper words to describe it, but that point I guess is a general theme of my works.

KIM: What would be an example of that in *Real World*?

BACK: What I wanted to tell in *Real World* was a question, what is then a fake world, or a world that does not exist. Then I got an idea that 'what we think is reality is not everything.'

KIM: As critics mentioned in articles, it is similar to the movie, *Truman Show* (1998).

BACK: Right. It's about the point of believing. Photography is a medium that can easily blind you, for it reproduces things in images. The images I look for are to lure in, confuse and deceive viewers, rather than 'taking the (represented) images as a means to believe' in a way.

KIM: Representative image are used in your works. *Real World*, for example, is composed of representative icons of tourist cities. They are copied and displayed in a different region, which is Korea. I was curious about your thoughts on it. In the way you show it, you don't just capture the place your subjects are located, but show them with the reality located outside of them, highlighting the subjects. In the case of Hiroshi Sugimoto, the artist tells the locations of his photographs in his writings, but they are isolated from the works themselves. Therefore, your works are different from other artists' works in that you reveal the locations.

BACK: I had no intention to have the audience see the works as if they were real. I wanted everyone to see they are fakes and replicas. The reason for that is because I rather think that I saw the more genuine (real world) in the replicas.

KIM: Do you mean the fakes that are more real than the real ones?

BACK: I have been thinking about why people continue the debate about the fake and the real, and I think I've seen fakes more than real ones since I was young. It could be a social phenomenon and it's true in the case of a handbag made by a certain luxury brand. Once there were more fake ones than the real ones. I indeed thought this whole debate itself was more like a fake one. It was because it signified a certain desire. I thought this miniature space was a place filled with psychological complexes.

KIM: Is *Real World I* produced during your study in the UK then?

BACK: It was during my brief visit to Korea while I was studying in the UK. I did works before, in which I photographed similar places in Europe and composited them with places in Seoul. It was when I was on a bus from Incheon to Seoul. I saw something similar to Eifel Tower, so I went there. It wasn't opened yet, but that was the place I had in my mind, existing in reality. That's what made this series to be started. In the past, France created the concept of miniature as a tourist attraction, and I had one in a region I lived once. I guess the French installed a miniature of some place that their country occupied in the early 1900s, in somewhere in Paris, and watched them pleasantly, recalling their past colonies. In fact, the countries with that kind of view are not the ones economically falling behind, but the ones that lack confidence.

KIM: Disney Land and its animations are also similar to that. They send their staff to Africa to depict exotic elements.

BACK: Right. Then I doubted that the things I've seen when I was young were all fake. It's a nonsense that the fakes are trying to become real ones. I then thought that I would lure in people a bit more with fakes.

KIM: But isn't it impossible to deceive people by revealing that point?

BACK: Sure. Deceiving is impossible on the surface by revealing, but if I had not done revealing...

KIM: But there are points in your works that blatantly show the reality that cannot be blinded.

BACK: Well, it is to covertly reveal the properties of fakes that are more real than the real ones. When the deceived subject walks into the story in the background, there is no point for them to be lured in.

KIM: I understand. I'd like to mention briefly about *Real World II*. I personally think that *Real World I* and *Real World II* have very different points.

BACK: Yes, they are different. For example, whereas I mixed different points in *Real World I* from its planning stage, such as cultural and social differences, the West and East, past and present, etc., *Real World II* had political stories in it. And *Real World II* was produced at the same time with *Blow Up* (2005-2007).

KIM: *Real World II* indeed seems to have more connections to *Blow Up*.

BACK: I did *Blow Up* long after I visited Pyongyang. I should first talk about my story about visiting Pyongyang. I felt like Pyongyang was a big movie set for *The Truman Show*. The fancy buildings there have no lights on when it becomes dark. Looking from outside, it seems there are no people living in there, like in a ghost city. I thought they are not so much different from the miniature park in *Real World I*, other than the fact that they are making up a set far bigger in its scale. And people there regularly move to somewhere. Watching people move like actors (I guess it's a certain effect of some political power or educational system), I thought their Lego-like movements were not that different from putting toys on a set. I've collected toy soldiers for a long time. The hardest thing when I was in UK was people's indifference, and at that time it was so hard that people are indifferent to a man from Asia. Then one day a British lady saw news about the battle of Yeonpyeong and asked me about whether I finished my military service, if Koreans do military service, if I had been to a war zone and if I had killed a man among other things.

KIM: The battle of Yeonpyeong was a chance for finding a connection between your military experience and your works.

BACK: I'm not sure. Korean army is more of a practice than a real fight. We just dig ground and shovel it. While I was being bombarded by the lady's questions, I thought that living in a foreign country is like being in a war zone. I came to think about why people only see the surface of war, while living in a foreign country itself is so difficult for me to struggle against and confront with language problems and cultural difference. Then I became rapidly interested in the issue of military.

KIM: About the war risk in Korea?

BACK: The war is not actually over yet in Korea. Anyway, I happened to start collecting toys as a hobby, then military manuals I collected in my desire for researches. I collected military manuals from many countries like Swiss and Korea. If you read military manuals, even if the arrangement of toy soldiers might seem random, but there are rules. If you have 10 Korean soldiers, manual rules how you should position them. But if you arrange Korean soldiers, Japanese soldiers and French soldiers according to a military manual, they eventually become a group of nothing with everything mixed. Creating such scenes, I made up my own rule for my works, which was to shoot photos between 12 a.m. and 4 a.m., when there are no movement of people.

KIM: How do you set your rules when you work?

BACK: They are my personal habits and also like a self-promise to myself. I found out that my works move towards unintended directions when I don't set my working time and place. If I don't, they just circle around London's road 406, which I often passed by. So I set certain boundaries and worked during the predetermined time period. People sometimes ask the reason behind setting up a certain time period, but it is not that important. There's no special meaning, either.

KIM: Then you first go to places for your research, and then bring toy soldiers and arrange them?

BACK: Yes. To talk about selecting locations, it's a characteristic of each artist. Some tend to prefer the first location they encounter. For example, while some people work impromptu

at some place that gives them inspiration, I become confident after I determine that I should go somewhere to photograph something. I generally do the shooting in a predetermined location even when other places look better.

KIM: From when did you start making such rules? Is it a working method from when you were a student?

BACK: No. I said earlier in this interview that there was a moment I felt like I was shooting a water gun in the water. I came to think it's meaningless to shoot photos without standards or rules. Maybe for that reason I sold most of my small format cameras away and started using large format cameras to see subjects through a stable view.

## **Blow Up**

KIM: But didn't you shoot photos in *Blow Up* series using a small format camera?

BACK: I took a large format camera to Pyongyang as well, but the authorities did not let me set up a tripod. So I took photos mostly with a 35 mm camera.

KIM: Did the title *Blow Up* come from the title of a movie, or was it a choice of words that best reflects your working method?

BACK: The meaning of the title *Blow Up* to me was more significant in 'burst' and 'explode,' rather than in the cinematic notion of 'to enlarge.' And I also experienced the change of meanings and characteristics of stories while accommodating enlarged images into my work. The title of *Blow Up* was employed in this context. I assume Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow Up* (1966) was also in the same context.

KIM: Were the shootings for *Blow Up* done while in different places? You said you stayed in North Korea for about a month, and then did you have specific places in mind and shoot photos when you visited the locations?

BACK: It's impossible to shoot photos freely in North Korea, since you can't move around alone. You can only shoot at where they take you to. For tourist groups, there are dedicated

tour guides for each group, and they have guides for people taking pictures, every time. They are in some ways almost an artist, like me.

KIM: Who are “they”?

BACK: The accompanying guides. In fact, when you try to shoot a photo at a certain position, a guide comes and tells you, “It is not good there. Take a photo from here.”

KIM: Did you take photos of what they told you to?

BACK: They surely say as if they gave you permission, but in fact it is mostly controlled. For instance, in case there is a nice building and behind is a shabby one within the same view, they point to other direction when I put my camera to photograph that beautiful building. If I’m lucky to photograph some place or people I liked, most of them are gone after inspections. They collect films and develop them, and give you back what is remaining in the next morning.

KIM: Do you mean they collect the original films?

BACK: Yes. A guide is counting how many rolls I use while I’m taking photographs. When I’m done with shooting photos, the guide asks me to give my films, saying “You photographed a lot. You used 15 rolls.” They develop the films and select the ones that can go outside of their country. For example, if you use a film roll with 36 pictures, sometimes you get 14 back and other times you get all of them, intact. They only select what they want and the rest comes back to me.

KIM: When did you visit North Korea?

BACK: In 2001.

KIM: When did you produce your works from the censored photos after leaving them untouched?

BACK: It was during 2004 and 2005.

KIM: How did you select and edit the photos? Was there any motif that made you use them?

BACK: Many (South Korean) people visited North Korea when I was working on the photographs I took before. While developing films and organizing prints after my 2001 visit to Pyongyang, I realized that every visitor took photos at the same place, and in some cases the people in the photos are just the same with my photos. Ah, there was no difference between my photos and the ones taken by tourists. I stuffed my photographs in a box. Then when I was in a group show at Photographer's Gallery in UK in 2004, a French artist brought me documentary photos taken in Pyongyang, and among them a portrait photo of a middle school girl holding a flower was very familiar to me. That photo was taken 3-4 years after my visit, but the girl in the photo was too familiar to me.

KIM: Was she a little bit different from when you took a photo of her?

BACK: The girl in the French artist's photo was a bit grown up. I felt very strange. The photo was not a good one, but I felt strange, as if she set her eyes on me. I searched the photos I took during my visit, and the girl in the photo was the same one in my photo. I vaguely imagined a movie set of *Truman Show*, and it happened in reality. Then I had an idea to reconstruct the story, so I found images first and thought about the parts I would 'enlarge.' There are a total of 112 works in *Blow Up*, about half of them have particular reason to be enlarged, while the others were done in an impromptu.

KIM: You originally said you work after setting a concept, but I have an impression that you should have selected only meaningful things and used them in your work. Is it related to a point that you set rules but there's no clear reason behind them?

BACK: It may be because the meaning of my action itself is more emphasized than the meaning of blown up images. One can see things even if they are hidden, or invisible. The reason behind the act of 'enlarging' a photo is that it is an act of trying to see the unseen, and it is meaningful whether the unseen is truth or fiction. Viewers may not understand these images, but I thought that typical souvenir photos of North Korea are inadequate to lure them in. Selecting images rather randomly was because I wanted to provide an imaginary space that viewers can intervene in. I thought in a way that I would have to create an aperture.

KIM: Is it based on a thought that people don't like to approach images if there are no apertures?

BACK: Especially so in photography. Seeing seems to be all about it, but photograph is indeed a space where viewers see and do arbitrary interpretations as well. They come to give meanings on their part in that process, give meanings such as truth and illusion, reality and unreality.

KIM: Did you take North Korea as your subject matter because of the stereotypical images the country shows?

BACK: We don't accept what we see as they are when we accommodate North Korea. There are a lot of paradigms in between. For instance, the image of North Korea is fixated according to the educational method in South Korea. We were indeed taught as if North Koreans were monsters with horns. The reason for this perversion to continue is, it might be that the image of North Korea is not fixated but the country itself is isolated and closed. It was very interesting to see such a country as a subject matter. But the power of image is too powerful in dealing with North Korea as a subject matter, so I often got calls suggesting to be part of anti-communist exhibitions.

KIM: In *Real World*, there are images that clearly show North Korea and images without specific meanings. They are similar to the displaying of exterior parts in *Real World*. What is the reason behind your showing the two things together? Does it come from your memory?

BACK: Well, I guess it's a separate issue from memory. Let's say I start telling a story. Similar to my habit when speaking, I unconsciously respond to images. It's hard to see this to be an intended one.

## **Utopia**

KIM: Let's talk about *Utopia*. Isn't it done by an appropriation or composition of found photos through a computer? Did you combine photos you didn't take?

BACK: Yes.

KIM: You worked with photos that you took in the previous works. In a way, *Utopia* and *Blow Up* have connections with the difference of *Real World I* and *Real World II*. I'd like to hear more about *Utopia*.

BACK: It was the first time for me to work with found photos. The interesting point is that the previous *Blow Up* also felt like I didn't take the photos, although they were enlargements of my original photos. I pushed the shutter, but the photos reflect the gaze of the guide. In a manner of speaking, I thought the previous photos I took were identical with the photos made by others who just simply visited North Korea. *Utopia* was started by getting photos by North Koreans.

KIM: How did the conception of *Utopia* come about?

BACK: At first I wanted to work on North Korea, like in *Blow Up*. In my case, I thought there is a common ground between the utopian world of North Korea and my interest, while most people mention political issues and criticise them.

KIM: What part do you think has a connection to you as an artist?

BACK: When you meet North Koreans, they say they are happy. But as a listener, you receive that response as a kind of show. They may be really happy, or not. We may be right about them, or they may be right. The perspectives on North Korea seem also to be very much diverse. What we see is one North Korea but to me the interesting thing was that each different perspective was sometimes violent, and twisted to the point of no mutual understanding. So I was thinking about a composition of such work, and happened to talk with a friend living in Japan, then he told me that he found an interesting place in Tokyo. I asked what it was, he told me there are North Korea Otakus in Japan, and there is even a place they gather. I visited the place by chance when I went to Tokyo, and there really was everything about North Korea from Kim Il-sung's portrait to a photo of Bae Yong-joon.

KIM: South and North Korea were mixed in there.

BACK: Yes, the South and North were clearly mixed. And that sight to me had two different stories, but to them they were not so much different. For example, if we go to some place and there are photos of Lenin and Obama, they are just objects that are made by images or idolized. This point was very interesting to me, so I did a research there for a whole week. I asked one of them if they have photos related to North Korea, and I received it a day after. There are no personal photos in North Korea. Only the ones hired by the government can take photos.

KIM: Ordinary people cannot take photos then?

BACK: Even if the ordinary people take photos, they can't use processing labs. It would be different if they have digital cameras and printers, but only the ones hired by the government can take photos. Like the images I got from Pyongyang, photos existing in a form of original prints in North Korea are the ones created following the direction that the government intended. Thus I didn't aim to judge what is right or wrong. Rather, I tried to present more dramatically the images that North Korea wants to display. I also created a color palette from typical color extracted from propaganda posters of 70s and 80s, and applied them to my photos.

KIM: The images of buildings seem similar to Russian constructivist or Bauhaus buildings.

BACK: They are not taken from the posters. I appropriated the structural elements in drawings of a Russian artist Lyubov Popova, and minimal buildings of German Bauhaus. The models of buildings where I perverted the whole image, some are done excessively to indicate they are modified, others are done unclear. I took the form of poster since I wanted to present them in a form of images that someone use when instigating certain stories.

KIM: *Utopia* series starts from photography and transforms into architectural works. Tell me more about the project.

BACK: The buildings in *Utopia* series are images that do not really exist. They are imaginary images made through enlargement and appropriation of buildings in the photos I archived. It's a process that I create the photographic images in reality. Many parts concealed behind the original buildings are made up by my imagination. I thought after all that creating, imagining something and repeating it is the very repetitiveness residing in a word 'utopia.' What I do is that act of repetition.

KIM: Earlier in this interview, you said you set a concept first and start working. Then how is your research done?

BACK: I collect a lot of images when I got a theme that draws my attention. Nowadays I search a lot on web, and I also read books when there is something lacking. Then I see works by other artists who work on similar issues.

KIM: Can you provide some examples of the works you just mentioned?

BACK: There are no specific points of connection, but I do a mapping while seeing the related works. For example, I closely examined the works by John Baldessari, Aleksandr Mikhailovich and Lyubov Popova. If the works and my works have points of connection, they might cause misunderstandings. Then I come to worry about whether I eliminate that possibility of misunderstandings or display it more by intervening in at a certain point.

KIM: Different from other works using references, your works do not seem to be directly related to the works of reference.

BACK: Do you like baseball? I was a baseball player once. To say it in terms of baseball, the most thrilling hit is the one that follows a foul line. For example, if there is a case that becomes a stable hit by hitting the center of a ball when I deal with a certain theme, I'd like to create the one that follows a foul line. You don't know where the ball would go, but I really like the thrill I get when the ball goes inside the line. When I do a research for artists, I'm not like thinking that I shouldn't do this since he did like it, or I should do like this since he did. I leave rooms for different readings. In other words, I can be affected by someone on a level of basic method, but I do not think seriously about references since the story I want to tell becomes unstable if I drive towards the direction where there is a reference.

KIM: About the contents your works, you fabricate images or develop stories by finding different stories from existing stories...

BACK: I think I basically didn't believe everything as I saw them. It was far more exciting to doubt and find out something while doing a background check. When you're in school, you'll become naïve if you listen and believe when teachers tell you some stories. But I'm like 'I don't think that's the case, there should be something behind' and imagine by myself, adapt other elements, create a story. If it wasn't expressed through my works, I should have become a swindler. I think, in the process of fabricating a ridiculous story and delivering it to someone, it also should be interesting to me to focus on. But isn't it possible for an artist? When I collect and sort certain images, the most important thing is that I utilize the property of photographic medium. To speak easily, I can surely drive towards a direction I want. But at the same time it is also what I feel uncomfortable in photography, since I'm concerned that I shouldn't drive my photos towards one direction like that. If I give choices to people, I

assume that the direction will become unclear. After all, since every story begins from a fragmentary image, it is the visible images that we see when first encounter it, excluding such things like stories hidden behind.

### **Utopia: printing**

KIM: You are also doing a work where you send your photos to different places.

BACK: It is a work where I send the same data to 13 countries and receive the prints.

KIM: You send the same data to be printed following the same rule?

BACK: I divided the data to 13 equal parts and sent them to 13 countries with the same request. With no color calibration, I just ask them to print the data as it is. This idea came from a technical problem I encountered in the past. I couldn't get the color I wanted when I printed in Korea even though I had a data setting for printing my images. It was very difficult at first to adjust the color. But later I thought it interesting that it is very difficult to have the results that should be identical in digital values, and they are different each time.

KIM: Do you work on it with *Utopia* series?

BACK: Yes. At the moment I received some of them, for some place I didn't send requests yet. I'll know what results I would get when I receive all 13 of them, but when did a test, I once had a result that is very different from what I had thought. I have a kind of habit that I feel empty to come back without anything, so I buy a small bag and bring local products when I have a chance to travel. For example, I had a chance to stay some time in Antwerp, and I bought the most Antwerp-ish bag as soon as I arrived there. Then I bought souvenirs, postcards and put them in, and brought it back with other things I collected there in it. Another thing I do in my travel destination is printing my souvenir photos I took there. Doing it for a few times, maybe it's just my personal feeling, the ones printed in the Netherlands are somewhat Dutch and the ones printed in Germany have something German in them. It may be an illusion, but if we get different results when we send the same data to someone, it would be just about the same with our situations in reality. We have certain parts

we take differently from one story. Similarly, I wanted to talk about the points that can become different while clearly being one image.

KIM: Is there a special reason for having 13 places?

BACK, Well, they just naturally become 13 while dividing an image.

KIM: Was there certain rules in deciding countries you would send the data?

BACK: There are no special rules. I tried to send it to 16 countries in a project I previously did with the Ministry of Defence. I sent an image related to army to 16 countries that participated in the Korean War, but I thought it was too farfetched. So for this time, I selected arbitrarily.

KIM: What are the countries you selected this time?

BACK: First I have USA, UK, Japan and France. I sent the data to Turkey, where I have contact from my last project. The data is sent to Taiwan, Canada, and Netherlands as well.

KIM: No African countries?

BACK: I had a lot of problems receiving a print of my image sent to Ethiopia. I clearly asked not to edit and to print, and they voluntarily reduced the size. So I contacted them through the Embassy of Ethiopia, but the people at the embassy were not professionals in photography as well, so again I received a photo with different size. At last, I received prints in various sizes.

## **My Life in War**

KIM: I saw a project of yours in 2010 that you photographed Korean soldiers.

BACK: Yes, that project is still going on.

KIM: Will organize works in the project and show them in public?

BACK: It's not decided yet, but a few pieces can be opened to public if there are some images corresponding to the flow of the upcoming exhibition.

KIM: The project with soldiers, what is the difference from the previous works of yours?

BACK: The title of the project is *My Life in War* (2010). I'm doing a research on stories about the military or war in a personal context (memory) and in social relations. I expect that I'll surely find a point of connection at some point. So now I am visiting the place I did my military service 17 years ago and shoot a portrait of a soldier doing what I did, taking photos of reserve forces in training, who are in between civilian and soldier, and shooting photos of icons that symbolize 'the present' in military posts or in the DMZ.

### **Box**

KIM: Can we see the collection of souvenirs and *Box* (tentative title) (2011-ongoing) have a common thread, as we talked earlier?

BACK: We can do so, but *Box* has images instead of souvenirs. The context is similar to the souvenir collecting.

KIM: What are the photographic images in *Box*?

BACK: They are not clearly confirmed yet. I'm thinking about whether to move on with a general story with photos, or to make a puzzle-like image that one should assemble. I already have some photos and some that need additional shootings, but I should decide first.

KIM: Duchamp used his popularity in *Boîte-en-Valise* (1941), a box in a suitcase. What do you put in this work?

BACK: I decided to go with the photographic images, but I'm still thinking whether I should go with an objective story in its way.

KIM: What is the objective image in a concrete sense?

BACK: Images that they (viewers) want. Put it easily, objective images can be subjective, but there are subject matters that are objective by themselves. For instance, Sanggil Kim's works are very objective, while NOH Suntag's images are very much subjective. I'm also thinking about what rules I would set in the way I shoot photos and display them.

## Seven Days

KIM: Can you tell about your work *Seven Days*?

BACK: *Seven Days* is a work with 21 photos. It starts from *Monday Morning, Monday Afternoon, Monday Night* and continues to *Sunday Night*.

KIM: Is there any particular reason for you to title the images by day and time?

BACK: The titles and images in fact do not have anything to do with each other. The titles are all decided already before shooting them. Do we call it a naming without a meaning? The image in *Sunday Afternoon* has nothing to do with its title.

KIM: Viewers want to read works in relation to their titles, if there are titles.

BACK: That's true. In some way, it might possible to call it a trap. There are a few photos of Korea in the slide boxes that later came to be a source of *Memento*. The photos are of Koreans, with "made in US 1970" behind. I might just think, 'they are taken when this person visited Korea,' but with 'made in US 1970' in a supposedly wrong place, I continue speculating unreasonably, 'what does this mean?', 'is this person adopted?'

KIM: What's written on the slide boxes may not correspond to the facts.

BACK: I once watched a movie, and this movie had a wrong subtitle. If it was in English or in Japanese, I could know that the translation was wrong, but no one could do so since it was in Iranian. Yet I came to imagine what I was seeing according to the subtitle. "I'm hungry" was on screen in a scene where father kills his son, but I was not sure while thinking something's gone wrong. When I feel that something is wrong, then I see very clearly that it doesn't make sense at all and everything is incorrect, but before that point I try to connect them anyhow.

KIM: It's a work based on photos, so the viewers are likely to read it as an image, rather than understanding its contents. What do you think of this point?

BACK: As a medium, photography is my specialty. But I am very much feeling the limit of photographic medium. But I'm not thinking like I should not do photography and do

paintings, and there always are conflicts between the limit and the medium, for photography is a medium that I can best use. To talk about good images only, it is in fact easy to produce a fancy image or an image that people can easily understand and like. I did commercial photography for a while, but that is the very point which made me quit the job. I thought I'm not doing photography to satisfy other people's views, and produce things that people like, without end. Surely, fewer people will be attracted to the images I create than to the popular ones. But I'm more interested in the process where people are attracted to my story and sympathize with it.

KIM: Is *Seven Days* mostly done in Japan? Or is it a series with various cities as its settings?

BACK: I have works I did in America, but it wouldn't be possible to show all the works I did in Japan and America in the coming exhibition.

KIM: Why do you want not to show the works you did in America?

BACK: The works done in America do not satisfy me much indeed. I personally don't like images that plainly display Americanness. For example, if there's a photo of a gas station that captured what's in between cities, there should be something concrete in people's mind even before they actually see the image. I somewhat avoid America since there are too many of that kind of issues. But still, I think there will be no attractiveness coming from the unfamiliarity itself, if I would do a work in a completely unfamiliar place.

KIM: What are the sizes of the images?

BACK: The exact size will be decided when the works are finally come out, but the works done in Japan will be as big as windows.

KIM: Do you have a specific place in Japan that you decided to use? Or is it a work in which Japan is generally a background?

BACK: The background is places around Tokyo. I didn't set up a rule when I was working in Japan before. But for this time I am doing a mapping in my studio to set up some rule in my own way. I have a photo of a building near Shinjuku Station, and it was a very historic and significant building. It's built by a famous architect in 1963, an iconic structure. But I wanted to eliminate such information. For instance, there is a photo that I partially erased to make it

not look so grand, and in one photo I wiped the surroundings out. I made efforts to find every intervening element and erase all of them. If information is all erased, what remains at the end is what is seen. This is, in some respect, I'm driving it towards a certain direction. Clues for possible communication with people are vanished by eliminating detailed visual information. So the typical story is ruptured, and I drive the system that people can perceive towards another direction. I might say I deconstruct the objective system of perception.

KIM: Would it be possible to decide to use a specific road as in *Real World II*?

BACK: It might be a road. I'm currently looking at connecting lines between cities, and continuously checking if I might use boundary locations in new towns around Tokyo.

KIM: While artists are doing projects, we become to imagine their works by stories we hear from the artists. I thought you would work on a personal space. But after I've seen your work, it seems you are working on public spaces. Do you come up with the structure of your works and then construct images when selecting locations for your works?

BACK: To explain it with the case of *Blow Up*, not all the selected images have meanings. It's not so interesting if each one of them has meaning. At the center, there is a story with half or two thirds of it given as truth, and I add up arbitrarily to support the whole context in the rest part.

KIM: You delicately choose images as rhyme and word choice are important in writing poems.

BACK: Yes. There is a common thread. I tell such stories in my lectures at school. That such words like love, friendship and romance are important in writing poems, but the postpositions and prepositions like 'with' and 'by' can make the words more dramatic or stronger. I think they are surprisingly important. So, if I ask 'why did I shoot this image', 'what is the meaning of this image' when I see images while working on a certain series, I assume that about half of them I cannot explain.

KIM: I suspect it may easily bring misunderstandings. So to speak, the photos with enlarged objects can be read as practical interest in the objects themselves. I think there can be many possible misunderstandings in the contents of your works.

BACK: Yes, that part is my complex but at the same time it is my strength. I studied photography, so I place limits such as correct focus and proper exposure, on whatever I shoot. I thus try to exclude the thoughts that 'I should shoot well' when I do shootings. It is very difficult to give certain meanings to photographic images. In my view, photos are eventually controlled by the viewers who read them, rather than by their creators. In a practical view, that can also be one way of understanding my photos.

## **Memento**

KIM: Let's talk about *Memento* project. I understand that it's based on collecting photos taken by others.

BACK: First of all, I sorted the collected photos. I did it with about 50,000 photos, of about 10 families. In most of photos you can see family relations. This person may be a mother, that person surely a father. These judgments are likely to be true, but they may also not be so. They are almost clear facts but they nevertheless are guesses. I see them through my standard and rationalize them as real events. I thought there is a great error in between, and tried to create a story with the errors.

KIM: Do you select good photos with no specific standard such as theme or category? I wonder what kind of process you go through to select photos.

BACK: The ones that are too out of focus, impossible to work on, and the ones with overlapping stories are removed in the first sorting. And the ones with too typical stories. Like photos of native Africans, taken in Africa. I excluded those kinds of photos and collected the ones that I can at least make an intervention in the first sorting.

KIM: What about the process of production then? Through what process are the collected photos transformed into the artist's works? I assume it would become possible to construct a great many stories with the collected images. Do you make an intervention in that process? Or do you completely leave it to other person?

BACK: Photography sometimes is same to someone's history, record, and life. But these many photos at some point leave the hands of their owners, and when they come into my

hands, the facts and backgrounds of the people in the photos do not matter so much. This is the point where I start from, a place where only the superficial images remain. What happened before are separated things in time and space. For example, if I see a photo and think 'this photo is from the 1960s', the reason behind it is that there is an idea that 'this is the image of the 1960s,' embedded in my mind through an education of images I received somewhere. I'm not sure if the education was correct or not, but I start from that point with such embedded standards. So that is the past, this is the present, and when I find the photo from that point of time at the present moment, I go back to the previous point to the original story. In this process, there should be a great error. I think that absolutely ridiculous things would intervene in this process. I once told my assistant to collect 8 photos that he would like to create a story after having a look at all the photos. I printed the 8 photos collected at that time. I am planning to ask someone to select 8 photos from the approximately 2,700 photos that passed the first sorting. But I will not give information about the people, who selected the photos lying on each table in the exhibition space, to my viewers.

KIM: The photos seem to be personal ones. How did you acquire them?

BACK: I bought them at markets while traveling in the US. When people took these photos and kept them well in slide boxes, these must have been very important stories to them. But when these photos were sold for 1 or 2 dollars, they were sold because they were not that important to someone else. The stories in these photos are very meaningful ones that someone had well organized, but the stories do not seem so meaningful to others. That makes the photos be sold, and they finally come to a third party like me.

KIM: How did you want them in case you did the selection?

BACK: The first few works I've done were very simple categorizations. I thought I would create a selection by dividing them under categories such as airplane, swimming pool, etc., and finally choosing one among them. The question of 'why I categorized like this' is not important to me. The process behind the already visible image, or the ideas before selecting, they are not important to me at all. They are important only to a person who selected them.

KIM: Do you expect a certain interpretation of your works from viewers?

BACK: That's different with each series. In cases of *Utopia* and *Blow Up*, I actually had expectations for certain understandings or response. It is the process of work that matters more, and there are images that I cannot control while shooting. For example, I can control the image of a certain building if I shoot them by myself, but for images that I cannot shoot, I don't have a control over how people would read them. It is because people who see images are helplessly subjective. In that situation, it can be said that there are no expectations in how the images would be received.

KIM: But that's somewhat similar to the case of *Blow Up*. The photos in *Blow Up* are the ones went through censorship and cutting by the North Korean authorities. Then, isn't it the same that you display enlargements of what are remaining, and the fact that you have control, or lost control of your images when you shoot them by yourself or they are cut off.

BACK: There are some differences.

KIM: But don't you think that you should show that aspect, for the contents of your work is its process.

BACK: In the case of *Memento*, if I reveal the process of selecting images, I think people may understand the process, but they will not get the meaning of the work. People ask continuously, for example, the same thing to *Utopia* and *Blow Up*. They say it might be helpful to understand *Blow Up* if the original prints are displayed together with the works. But I never say yes to such requests. It's because I'm not presenting an answer in my works, but I focus on luring people with the result that comes after. The process in the middle, such as who selected what and what stories are in where, does not need to be documented and shown.

### **Archive Project**

KIM: I heard you are planning a work that uses a photo archive of old factories in America. What type of project is it? You also did a work that you recorded the process of renovation, or the process of change of a factory in Gwangju from 2009 to 2010. Tell me also about that work.

BACK: The former is what I did with the original prints that I archived during my stay at a residency program in New York. They are images that archived reconstructions of factories

with no information of names and locations. I think nowadays that the images I took photos of and the ones that are archived are not that different. I was not being in the time and place where the factories in the photos were built. The images are created far before even I was born. Looking at the images, and thinking about how it would have been if I had recorded the images, they would not be much different from the existing ones. I thought the issue of selection after documenting would have more effect. The project on the change of Maeil Dairies factory the year before last, or the current one for the change of the former Defense Security Command, they are also not so much different from the images I archived. It was interesting to see me educated and driven towards a direction of a certain code without my knowledge, by acquiring images. So I am planning to present the archived photos with the works I'm currently working on, or with the works I did. I think that the images in these photos are strangely interconnected through a code, which image, although they are all taken in different time and place. I also think that this would confuse the viewers who try to believe as such.

KIM: In this archive project, the existing images and the images created by the artist coexist without particular order. Different times and places are mixed, but it is confusing to know when and where they are. Could you tell me about the intention of the work?

BACK: The previous answers might also be applied here.

KIM: You photographed structures with the titles of your previous works installed on them.

BACK: Since I mostly do new works in the coming solo show, and because people do not come to see the old works like *Blow Up*, *Real World* and *Utopia*. So I came up with an idea of producing images with the titles of my works, for the titles count more than a half in my previous works.

KIM: The title for the upcoming exhibition is set as *Deferred Judgement*, and it seems difficult than the previous ones. 'Deferred Judgement' reminds of philosophical thoughts such as phenomenology, while *Utopia* and *Blow Up* are open titles which let their viewers have different thoughts.

BACK: I thought a lot about the titles in my previous exhibitions. But I just provide words that are in a way ambiguous, like 'Real World', 'Blow Up' and 'Utopia.' Rather than

intriguing viewers to infer the meanings later on, I give clues from the start to let them work it out. It seems that in general the titles have been playing crucial roles in my works. In other words, the irony from titles can perverse the viewers' gaze towards objects in photos. I think in the end images are something that truly drift among delusions and faiths that we respectively have created. I titled the coming exhibition *Deferred Judgement* to reflect the expectation on how to view images and how to communicate the images.