

## Hein-kuhn Oh's portrait photographs: the front and back of the face

"But he had already jerked straight round, stared, glared again, and seen but the quiet day."

-Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw*

Dark gray sky forms the backdrop for Hein-kuhn Oh's black and white portrait photographs. This dark sky is like a strange abyss that cannot be named. The distance between the deepest depths to the surface of the individual



Louisville, Kentucky, 1991 'from Americans Them'.

are composed of comparable tonalities that could be easily seen as stains of a similar shade had there been no shapely outlines. And at the forefront are the individuals who appear to have arisen out of darkness. These individuals seem if as if they could sooner disappear into the dark shade in the photograph but they have risen clearly and vividly with a quick burst of the flash - revealing their face with as much force as that flash of light in an instantaneous moment. Like a deer caught in the headlights, the individuals are momentarily frozen. They appear to have been actually pulled to the surface by

the force of his flash. In < Americans Them ><sup>1</sup> and < Ajumma ><sup>2</sup> series, both

photographed in the 90s, Oh has adapted the style of black and white documentary photography and at the same time, he has developed a unique vocabulary to construct

<sup>1</sup> *Americans Them*: Hein-kuhn Oh's documentary work intended to portray an outsider's view of Americans and their culture while travelling across the U.S. (1989~ 1991)

<sup>2</sup> [i] *Ajumma*: a general term used to refer to middle-aged women in Korea. It is sometimes used as a colloquial expression to belittle women or compare them to younger women. Hein-kuhn Oh conceived a series of photographic portraits in 1999 under the title of *Ajumma* in which he captured various looks of middle-aged Korean women.

portrait photography as an independent genre. During this time, the artist used a strong artificial light, i.e. a flash, to brightly emphasize the surface of the subject so that the background, even if photographed at midday, appears to have been taken at night. Arguably, this is the most effective method to isolate and separate the individual from the background. The application of the flash-lighting at a close distance intensifies the contrast in depicting the face. It renders a strong light, maintains focus and the expressions on the individuals are well kept. All of these measures are put into play to accentuate the face. The individuals' face, the bright surface containing an expression, all subtly revealed by the flash - forms a distinct sphere portrayed in bright gray tones, also termed the *white quality* by Gilles Deleuze. The face is presented to us like an empty white wall but at the same time, it is a domain defined as an unequivocal *significant* that endlessly suffuses meaning through the attributed two points, that is, the gaze.

While reminiscing on the *Americans Them* series, Hein-kuhn Oh states that many Americans looked like they either needed to stand or sit like the characters they had seen in films. According to Oh, those portrayed in his photographs - even the little children - are reenacting in front of the camera. In the short time between Oh picks up his camera and the burst of flash goes off, the individuals change their expression and their posture. They could be adapting the looks of John Wayne, Marilyn Monroe or James Dean, representative figures who shape the subconscious memories of Americans, or they could be playing on many other subcultural icons but it is an obvious reality that their identities are in part shaped by characters so that their own actuality and various imageries cannot be differentiated. The key elements in this series are closely related to the elements that constitute Hein-kuhn Oh's subsequent works. This key element is associated with the surface connecting the exterior of the subject with its environment, or to borrow Deleuze's terminology once again, the face and the posture are related to the *affect*. That is to say, the connection to the world via the face or the exterior covering the delicate and subtle interior of an individual is also the surface that stipulates the greater world that surrounds it or the appearance of the world. The face or the posture is the result of what society embeds on the subject but coincidentally, the transformation of the world and the society are reflected through the face and posture. In general, fact and fiction are determined through the artist's intent. For example, individuals portrayed in theater and paintings are modified versions of their actuality or made fictional through the artist's technical intervention. In contrast, the boundary between fact and fiction in Hein-kuhn Oh's photographs are latent in the individuals captured. That is to say, as a

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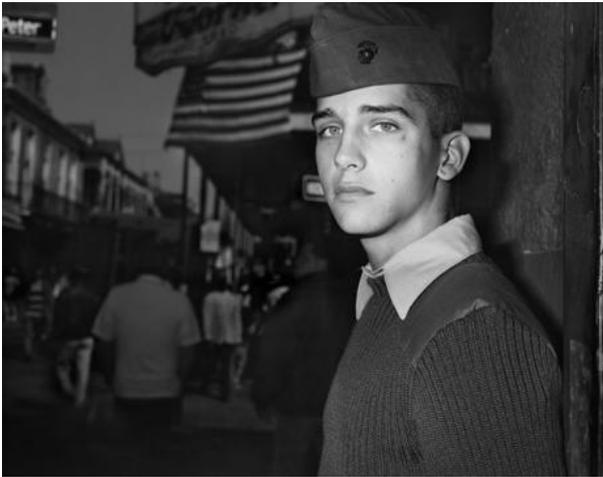
subject, the individuals are subject to change within the given conditions of the world. Much like a chameleon that changes color according to its surroundings, the individuals engage in their identity. Photographs provide an instantaneous structure for this transformation to be conceived. The artist completes this structure by drawing the subject into the gray scale, aiming the camera and lighting him with the flash. The incisive overlaps of layers are constructed through this process. Therefore, photograph is turned into a constructive or technical medium that simultaneously reveals the *affect* of the subject and thus modified world.

The aforementioned construct is made even more apparent in <Itaewon Story> and <Gwangju Story>, two photography series conceived by Hein-kuhn Oh upon his return to Korea. Both stories emphasize representation of the combined fact and fiction in the depicted individuals. The location of the stories, Itaewon and Gwangju are both places of dramatic accounts in modern Korean history. Oh met the individuals in <Itaewon Story > on the alleys of Itaewon, the artist's hometown since his childhood and a place well-known for the cluster of businesses catered for foreigners, centered on the American military base. Thereafter, Oh met individuals in <Gwangju Story> on the street called Geumnam-no<sup>3</sup>, where traces of the 80s Gwangju Uprising still remain. For all of the individuals portrayed, the camera acts as a forceful reminder of the memories related to places and events; the camera rouses the *affect*. Similarly to <*Americans Them*>, the transformation of individuals into subjects in these series marks an extraordinary chemistry between the camera and the subjects. Aligning their reenacted self to the gaze of the camera aimed at them initiates an action that could be referred to as a 'circular telescopic' process. Crowds of actors, extras, spectators and police all gathered on Geumnam-no on the filming day of the movie, <A Petal ><sup>4</sup>, were present in an amalgam of chaotic individual identity but once the camera appeared, they all stopped talking and instantly transformed themselves into figures accounted at Gwangju Uprising. It is as though there is no proper way of objectively describing their two sides in their dynamic state. Representation and presentation are like two sides of a coin, and the face is also composed of a front and back. It can be observed henceforth how Hein-kuhn Oh gained a better understanding on certain conditions of photography based on this fascinating experience.

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<sup>3</sup> *Geumnam-no*: One of the biggest roads in the center of Gwangju. The biggest rebellion of the May 18 Gwangju Democratization Movement occurred on this road.

<sup>4</sup> *A Petal*: a film that metaphorically portrays the political situation surrounding the May 18 Gwangju Democratization Movement through the stories of a girl named Petal who becomes mentally ill after losing her mother in the turmoil, and the stories of a man who takes her as a sexual slave. The film was released in 1995, and directed by Sun-woo Jang.



'New Orleans. Louisiana. 1991' from 'Americans Them'.



'New Orleans. Louisiana. 1991' from 'Americans Them'.

In comparison, there are several differences in <Ajumma> series that distinguish it from earlier Hein-kuhn Oh's black and white portrait photographs. First, the individuals, or the subjects, are shot at a closer proximity using a stronger flash light. The flash is tilted slightly upward, aimed directly at the center of the subject's face creating a dark outline where the light falls off. The photos were

all taken during daytime but the background is more subdued in a dark tone than what would be considered normal because of the strong artificial light used. This light isolates the individuals, making their anxious identity seem even more apparent. Second, the surface of the face is drawn to abstraction in the process of enlarging an already close-up image during printing. The act of photographing the face is an

act of recording a surface with an expression. A face that is enlarged bigger-than-life-size is beyond realistic, it is excessive or superfluous. The viewer is thus forced to look at the surface of the face rather than the expression. This surface reveals two types of distinct reflections: a shiny reflection on the protruding parts of the face caused by the burst of the flash, and a reflection of subtle middle tones created by the use of a low contrast film. Enlargement of the photo creates an effect of polarizing two extremes that form the interior and exterior of the individual. Third, the differentiating element of this series is that the work is concerned with a specific group of figures known as ajumma, or middle-aged women. Unlike prior works, naming the body of work <Ajumma> stresses the role of index in photography. That is to say, it further accentuates the mixed narratives indicated by the image. Especially in Korea, ajummas differ from an ordinary definition of women and they could even be attributed to a kind of a 'tribe' representative of a certain culture, attitude and behavior.

But this tribe is unique in the sense that they are isolated from other social structures, forming sort of an indistinct, floating class. As a collective body of an ambiguous group, they are mothers who bear a different surname from the rest of their family and they fight for survival but do not have a specific job. Their ensemble of heavy makeup, attitude and behavior are the typical elements that define a woman as an ajumma. The individuals in this series are comparative to those depicted in <Americans Them>, <Itaewon Story>, and <Gwangju Story> in that they are type-cast according to their stereotype, but they are also set apart in that they are acting in their own roles and that they are not mixed with other formulaic models. In actuality, their faces are not a reenactment of their social standing, personality, status or anything else for that matter. Hein-kuhn Oh's photographs clearly reveal this point. (It is said that, for this reason, some of the women who had posed for the photos asked not to show their photos). This is ultimately what could be referred to as a kind of 'non-representation', or *degré plein*.

Successive <Girl's Act><sup>5</sup> series can be understood as an extension of the <Ajumma> series. It is actually very rare that one should come across photographs of teenage girls in Korea and therefore this body of work is both unique and surprising. The reason for the lack of photographs of teenage girls is probably related to taboos related to sexual anxiety and desire aroused by the category defined as 'girls'. To borrow Henry James's expression, what makes their existence unique as girls is analogous to *The Turn of the Screw*. If being a woman is like one turn of the screw, a girl is equivalent to two turns of the screw. Girls, with their underdeveloped,

juvenile qualities, clumsy, awkward gestures and instinctive gaze, form an even more ambiguous tribe that again differs from ajummas. The girls are becoming women but they are not yet women. They fill the world with innocent yet common threat comparable to a fragile and sensuous layer of the cocoon before the metamorphosis. Appearance alone changes everything. Words that in general act as qualifiers for girls such as purity, tenderness,



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<sup>5</sup> *Girl's Act*: Portraits of high-school girls wearing uniforms. The girls are students of an acting school and the work has been conceived under the theme of 'girls acting as girls'. It portrays typical postures and attitudes of teenage girls heavily influenced by entertainment media such as film, fashion, drama, commercials, etc. (2000~2004)

slenderness and shyness are actually meet with skepticism in the depicted subjects through anxiety, imbalance and disheveled postures. Hein-kuhn Oh has photographed girls but they are not subjects we held in common as 'girls'.



Sun-ju Kim, age 18, Hye-

jin Kwon, age 18, 2003 'Girls Act' series.



Jin-

hee Han, age 17, 2003 'Girls Act' series.

They are strange beings living in an unfamiliar place in an unfamiliar time. Moreover, unlike other photographs, these photographs are filled with comparatively softer light and the photos have less contrast; they are composed of a full range of the grey scale nearer to the brighter shades of gray. Oh has photographed some of the plainest girls wearing uniform from ground up so that they appear like commemorative statues. The horizon behind them is at their ankle height and behind the figures are surfaces of soft and bright gray, i.e. a wide open sky. In this series, Oh has used a frontal flash in combination with rim light to separate the individual and the sky, inducing a film-like atmosphere. As indicated in the title, 'act' is a key factor in describing this highly fictitious and abstract space in which the subjects are located. The models in the portraits are teenage amateur actors attending an acting school and they have constructed all attributes of the subject to transform it into material for reenactment. Next is the question of the source of imagery for the girls who have been trained to act. In asking what girls in uniform should portray, they summon various methods based on their experience and their standing in the world, reconstructing it into an expression or an attitude. The surface of these photographs is

where fact and fiction are entwined, customs of reproduction are constructed and the trace of ambiguous identities are created and thus recorded.

All of the individuals recorded by Hein-kuhn Oh ranging from middle-class Americans, those found in the back alleys of Itaewon, citizens gathered at the filming scene on Geumnam-no, to ajummas and girls on the street are presented in the process of reenacting something that is not innate. That process is analogous to the process of exploring the conditions of abstractness, and through that route, abstraction is made apparent. These photographs provide the key to locating that particular characteristic that Hein-kuhn Oh adapts in his portrait photography. Abstraction of the face is achieved when the face is used as a patriarchal *significant* which is applied through the system of power, meaning and intent. But is this possible even if the *significant* is incomplete? This is the highly paradoxical yet subtle quality of Hein-kuhn Oh's work. In his photographs, the face is an incomplete *significant* that fluctuate between power and defense, meaning and desire, intent and abandonment. Oh constructs a system to record in his photograph a part of a continuously moving subject. And as with all other photographs, Oh's photographs are composed through a process of propositioning a series of time-space and device. But in spite of this, he does not show reconstructions of well-known truths. We actually do not know the individuals captured in his photographs. The realms these individuals belong to are both social and worldly domains. But they could also be subjects preconceived by the artist. Either way, the individuals in his photographs struggle to separate themselves from the isolated background that they belong to. Here, the artist plays the role of director who does not allow his subjects to look behind as they fight the ghosts that surround them. At the click of the shutter, the moment of truth becomes the moment in which the subject is made conscious of the self and reenacts it. Of course, even if the subject looks back, there is nothing left for him to discover. Only a transparent light will remain in its place.

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