

## **Out of Pictures Out of the Archive<sup>1</sup>**

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I contemplate on the two words: pictures, and archive. I remember my rediscovering of about a dozen photographs from my old family albums, stashed away in a letter envelope and rumbled up among other contents in the top drawer of my office desk. The photographs were severely warped. I thought it fortunate that they did not get creased or bent. In an effort to flatten them, I put them back in the envelope, and placed them under a stack of heavy books in one of my bookshelves. The photographs are small prints, some of which are in black and white, others faded in color. Some prints are in bad shape, as the printed chemical film is partly peeling off from the slightly heavier paper backing. I examine the expressions and moods of my family, and my heart sinks at times. These were the photographs that I chose, for one reason or another, for the purpose of painting from them. I did not succeed. But I do not recall how the photographs ended up not in my studio, but in my office desk. I am baffled by my lack of memory of their trajectory from my studio to my office. Perhaps I wanted to scan the photographs and save them as digital files in my computer hard drive.

I think about some other photographs of my family the last time I saw. I experience difficulty remembering when I last saw my photo album, let alone which photograph I saw. I finally recall some images from my youth, my family outings at a war memorial in Seoul. It was a sunny day, and my brothers and I were sporting the same outfit, and in it I detected the caring hands of my mother. Standing behind a now defunct cannon, each of my two older brothers pretended to be operating some levers. I was standing off to the side, with my right arm raised, pointing to a far distance. It could be that I was giving an order to my comrades, or I was observing their actions as an assistant. There they are, the images from the distant past of my life that I do not recall, but I am obliged to admit that these events took place. After all, these photographs predate the birth of digital imaging software by a few decades. And the photographs exert certain amount of emotional gravity on my psyche. The significant details, such as our identical outfit, the tank, and so forth, set up the context of the incident, and despite my failed memory they constitute the veracity of the event.

Turning to the photographic work of Back Seung Woo, I do not detect any sentiments, emotions, or empathy in his images. The kinds of personal narratives, musings, and emotional reflections on photographic images that I described above, are nowhere to be found when engaging with his images. Considering the impersonal nature of his photographic practice, my recollections might be taken as cliché. Back's images do not occasion from his or anyone's private life experience. Hence, they have nothing to do with personal photo albums. But how is it that one finds the images so familiar, and yet simultaneously strange, or, uncanny? Before I answer this question, a little detour may be necessary. Rather than reiterating on the dichotomy between what is real and what is not, what is visible or invisible, I

consider Back's work through some other conceptual frameworks, such as the notions of picture, proxy, and the archive.

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There is nothing "original" about the photography of Back Seung Woo. This is certainly not meant to be an offense or sarcasm, but rather an echoing of Back's own comment. He confessed in his interview with Kim Sun Jung in this volume that trying to make more beautiful or better versions of the identical motifs, of which there are tens of thousands of images circulating out in the world, is akin to squirting a water gun at someone under the water. This water gun analogy is less an expression of frustration and anxiety on the part of the artist than an expression of absurdity, futility, and even impossibility of making a photographic image that can be considered "new," "original," or "authentic," especially in this age of proliferation of digital imaging processing. One recalls Duchamp's prediction that something will come along and make photography unbearable just as painting became unbearable after the emergence of photography. But Duchamp might not have guessed that it would be photography that made itself unbearable. Of course, the water in Back's analogy refers to the sea of amateur digital photographs that constantly bombard us via technological means, as much as the heavy burden of the history of photography itself, despite its relatively short history.

Recognizing that making an "original" photographic image would be unnecessary, if not impossible, is then a necessary condition and departure point for Back's artistic practice. As such, his work is not the kind of photography that is born out of the chance elements and the so-called "decisive moment" that Cartier-Bresson had advocated, the split-second moment that capture the reality at stand-still. Instead, Back's work is an inquiry into how a photographic image can possibly be produced. His interest lies in unearthing the potentiality of photographic image out of the terms of its crisis: its very reproducibility, ubiquity, and meaninglessness. Ultimately he is interested in how multiple and different meanings can be generated from what appear to be already familiar images.

The subjects of Back's photography are not so much actual subjects depicted in the photographic surface but rather what have already become *pictures* that we recognize immediately. That is to say, his photographic images do not simply capture "what has been" *per se*, merely fulfilling the fundamentally indexical nature of photography, but instead presents us images that are already recognizable as familiar pictures. Back's photography can be located in the lineage of contemporary artists, especially those identified as Pictures group, who respond to the ways in which media influences our perception of the world, and how media makes us unwittingly tourists and voyeurs at a safe distance.<sup>2</sup> Championed by the American critic Douglas Crimp, Pictures group included the artists of renown who emerged in the late 1970s, such as Sherrie Levine, Cindy Sherman, Richard Prince, Laurie Simmons, Louise Lawler, Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein, et al.<sup>3</sup> This is the

generation of the artists who have thoroughly internalized the lessons of Walter Benjamin's famous essay on the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. Consequently, the artists conceived of photographs as multiples without an original, and used appropriation and quotation as key strategies. Similarly and yet differently, Back conceives his work as pictures constituted by multiple layers of pictures.

Here is a list of dictionary definitions of the word "picture": a photograph, a drawing, a movie, a portrait or painting, an impression, an image on TV screen, a description, a mental image, understanding a situation, as in "get the picture," being beautiful, to be informed, to be symbolic of something. Hence "picture" is an encompassing term that includes the meanings of photomechanical image and handcrafted painting, as well as a metaphorical term that denotes situations and the understanding or knowledge thereof. The distinction between a photograph and "picture" in this context should then be readily apparent: While the former simply records "that has been," the latter is already a *remediation* of "that has been." If a photograph shows a fragmented detail image of the world in a direct way, picture instead shows us the world of images, or the realm of images.

Even though Back's pictures are easily recognizable as famous landmarks, toy soldiers, or North Korean people and urban landscape, they are also charged with strange sense of ambiguity. This dual and paradoxical condition of recognizability and ambiguity is the salient characteristics of the art of artists identified as the Pictures generation. Crimp identified the dominant strategies among the group of artists as dealing with mostly appropriated images through "process of quotation, excerptation, framing, and staging," resulting in works that problematized and disputed the modernist entitlement to authorship and authenticity. Most importantly, Crimp argued that the art of Pictures group "are not in search of sources of origins, but of structures of signification: underneath each picture there is always another picture."<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, one finds picture underneath each picture in the series *Real World I*. Located in Ains World near Seoul, the world-renowned landmarks are of course built structures in miniature scale. However, in Back's work, the landmarks appear as pictures in the way Crimp explains. Underneath the surface of each photograph, the miniature landmarks appear as a kind of readymade pictures that connote multiple implications which can be obvious, but as a whole ambiguous. As the artist notes, the miniature landmarks from the faraway places belong to the legacy of European colonialism. The first of its kind was unveiled in Paris in 1931 when hundreds of thousands of Europeans flocked to Paris to "tour" the exotic architectural forms with orientalist bent, if not certain condescending regard. It was one of the earliest forms of cultural safari in which "sophisticated" viewers drifted from one culture to another.

Situated in different spatial and temporal context in South Korea in the twenty-first century, the same landmarks signify radically different meanings altogether. Perhaps they are a metaphor for the artist's generation of experience in growing up

with fake cultural commodities, such as luxury designer bags, which is common in the South Korean market economy until this day; perhaps they refer to the South Korean's inferiority complex developed over the painful decades of the twentieth century; perhaps they now represent South Korea's own desire to catapult itself into a major league of powerful players: they too now can look down on miniature buildings from the "advanced" Western cultures. Borrowing Derrida's notion of *différance*, which refers to the endless deferring of meaning due to the unstable relationships between the signifier and the signified, the landmarks may be referred to their facsimiles of similar miniature structures, located nearby in Tobu World Square in Japan or Beijing World Park, rather than the actual original landmarks scattered throughout the world.

There is another level of structural signification at work here, which entails strategies of distancing, framing, and nullifying. The entire "collection" of the world landmarks at Aiins World have already been gathered through removal of the buildings out of their original contexts. Back's photographs foreground the strategies of decontextualization through quotation, excerptation and staging. To be more precise, Back's specific ways of framing his compositions bring our attention to and amplify those strategies already used, intentionally or not, by the designers and engineers in constructing Aiins World.

If the artists of Pictures group appropriated existing images, Back underscores the complex layers of signification by emphasizing the constructed nature of both the landmarks and his photographic representations of them. Back maintains enough physical distance from the landmarks so as to render them part of larger urban reality of South Korea. The landmarks are usually shot from oblique angles, often juxtaposed by nearby overpass or apartment complex, thereby downplaying the landmarks' monumental implications. This diminishing of their iconic status is enforced by inclusion of information plaques, spotlights, and what seem to be rows of small *bonsai* trees. The effect is one in which the world famous landmarks are belittled.

Such strategies reveal the sense of psychological and cultural distance on the part of the artist in regard to the subject. Viewers of *Real World I* may well share the sense of distance, which results from their own distance to the histories and politics that produced the landmarks. After reviewing all the individual photographs in the series, one can imagine the sense of deflation or depletion of wonder or curiosity one might have had about the landmarks initially. Placed in close proximity to one another, often separated by *tromp-l'oeil* backdrops, all the landmarks become equally insignificant. *Real World I* reveals such nullifying effects of the miniature theme parks. In the end the series is a set of complex layers of pictures: the imaginary pictures of the landmarks that retain their iconic status and coherence of their original context; the symbolic pictures of what the landmarks allude to South Korean visitors in conscious or unconscious ways, such as the inferiority complex, or the desire to become a major international presence; and finally the pictures in the realm of the real, which works against symbolization or representation. In *Real*

*World I*, the real, paradoxically, evolves round the proxies of the originals surrounded by all that is visible that thwarts the representation of the real.

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The subject of *Real World I* is a result of cultural appropriation. South Koreans, Japanese and Chinese who cannot afford to visit the real landmarks in faraway countries will have to make do by seeing the proxies of the real in the miniature theme park in their respective country. The series connotes the collapse of temporal zones and spatial distances among multiple localities, which is an increasingly necessary condition of not only globalization but also of the nature of image production. In other words, artists as image-maker today confront vast archives of readymade images that defy the limits of time and space.

Back Seung Woo produced two series of photographs that pertain to North Korea, entitled *Blow Up* and *Utopia*. The first distinction to be made is the fact that *Blow Up* was made from Back's own photographs that he took during his one-month visit to North Korea, while *Utopia* was generated from appropriation of propaganda photographs released by North Korea. However, the distinction has proven to be meaningless. It is well known that "minders" always accompany visitors who take photographs in North Korea, and Back's case was no exception. He was allowed to photograph in places only with permissions, his films were confiscated, and returned to him as cut up negatives and prints that were deemed appropriate in advancing the positive images of North Korea abroad. Therefore, Back considers that it is the minders who have taken the photographs in the series *Blow Up*. Not surprisingly, Back initially found his photographs nearly identical with those taken by other visitors to North Korea. It is for this reason he simply stored them away in his own archive.<sup>5</sup>

Years later, upon encountering the appearance of the same person, a young North Korean woman carrying flowers, in another photographer's work who visited North Korea, Back decided to use his photographs and blow them up. What was the motivation behind this decision to open up his archive? It was his recognition that the young woman was a proxy figure, an agent, who was always assuming the same role. This recognition made the artist further realize that the minders assumed the position of proxy decision maker for the artist, and the artist himself became a temporary automaton that pressed the shutters only when approved by his minders, just like typical North Koreans who are perceived by outsiders to be carrying out their assigned roles. Back also recognized that there were other automatons, or "types," such as another young woman who appeared jogging at the exact intervals everyday.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, what constituted his archive turned out to be a collection of images constructed by multiple proxies, including the artist himself, in what seemed like a huge film set. For a typical photographer, difficulty in claiming one's work as

evidentiary material for an actual event would be challenging enough. However, it is now widely recognized that making truth claims through photography is no longer tenable at all times. Back must have realized that his entire archive of the photographs from his trip to North Korea must be considered anew: not as the documentary record of his visit, but in terms of investigating the always incomplete and ideologically partial nature of all archives. Given the artist's lack of control in the content of his archive, it is in a way a found archive, or archive of found images, just like the other archive that provided the basis for the series *Utopia*.

Back's decision to use his "own" archive of images then implies a new way of looking his photographic images of North Korea. His own blown up images are not about North Korea *per se*, but more about exploration of producing images in different way: i.e. Through (the artist's unintended) collaboration with proxies in making photographic images.

But what does it mean to blow up the photographs that survived the minders' censorship? Like the protagonist in Antonioni's film *Blow Up*, was Back hoping to discover some hidden secrets that are lurking underneath the surface? By blowing up, one thing that becomes glaringly apparent is the ontological dichotomy that conditions the images of North Korea: iconic monumentality and ubiquity on the one hand, and abstract anonymity on the other. The former obviously refers to the legacy of Kim Il Sung family that manifests in the form of gigantic statues, murals, photographs on the wall, and tiny badges worn on lapels. The latter is represented by the distant and close-up views of people photographed, engaged in various activities, or in transit.

Typical photographs of North Korea taken by foreign visitors focus on the portraits of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, the sheer scale of the monuments, the spectacles of Arirang mass games, the military marches and display of missiles, and the extreme poverty in recent years. The photographs tend to show the subjects, whether human, propaganda posters, or beautiful North Korean women officers, in straightforward manner in highly saturated colors. These photographs also capture the anonymity of North Koreans. However, they tend to reflect the foreign visitors' desire to restore the individuality of the subject by presenting them in sharp focus.

By contrast, the images in *Blow Up* lack the spectacular qualities often seen in the images of North Korea that circulate in the media outside the regime. They are mostly in the pale tonal ranges of blue-grays, save for the intense reds in the painted bouquet of flowers that glorify the *Juche* ideology. In *Blow Up*, the image are severely cropped and considerably blurry, reinforcing the notion of fragmented and limited nature of all archives, and possibly suggesting viewers' inaccessibility of the subjects and impenetrability into the society. Even with close-up views of people we are not truly allowed to take a glimpse of their identities, what their lives are like. Instead we are reminded of what is left out of the picture. Such is the condition of an archive: what is contained in an archive does not match one's memory of actual lived experience but rather pronounces what is missing.<sup>7</sup>

While many of the subjects hardly show any emotions, some do. The young performing girls have smiles on their faces. However, there is simply no way of confirming whether their emotions are truthful or in pretense. Regardless of our opinion on the “rogue” regime, perhaps it may even be barbaric on our part to question the authenticity of their smiles. If an individual becomes a defector s/he may come to a different understanding of the isolated society. Until then, their smiles may be genuine. To my mind, this is the conundrum suggested by *Blow Up*. The people appear to be preselected and privileged, and they seem to fulfill their roles as proxy agents that can be replaced by other proxies at any time. And yet their entire demeanor, speech, and expressions defy our assumptions that they are in constant mode of pretense in order to survive the regime. *Blow Up* obliges the viewer to defer judgment on our perception of their “plight,” which ultimately remains unrepresentable.

Interestingly, Back Seung Woo considered the meaning of *Blow Up* less in terms of enlargement than explosion or destruction. As the images get enlarged they lose the resolution. However they strangely gain a sense of tension suggested by violence and destructive forces that are not visible but latent. The images of the series *Utopia* carry the latency of violence in a different manner: the irrationally expanded buildings loom large, verging on tipping over; in others saturated colors in the backgrounds exude an ominous charge to the landscapes with the conspicuous absence of human figures. In Freudian terms, if *Blow Up* is a manifest dream in which what is visible conceals repressed meanings, *Utopia* is latent one that materializes them, albeit in Back’s peculiarly phantasmic way.

In this regard, the archival projects of *Blow Up* and *Utopia* are paranoiac. In his astute observation, Hal Foster explicated that “the paranoid dimension of archival art is the other side of its utopian ambition,” for it functions “to recoup failed visions in art... to transform the no-place of the archive into the no-place of a utopia.”<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the series *Blow Up* sustains a dialectical relationship with *Utopia* in both formal and conceptual terms. In certain sense, the titles of these series are interchangeable: In *Utopia*, the images of Bauhaus buildings are appropriated and added to blow up the buildings in Pyongyang, while *Blow Up* depicts Pyongyang presented as utopia. Both Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin identified the utopian bent of photomontage of the 1920s in terms of its agitational and emancipatory dimension.<sup>9</sup> However, Back’s quotation and excerptation of Russian Constructivism and the Bauhaus are far from utopian aspiration. Rather, Back may be ambivalent about the now apparent naivety on the part of the historical avant-garde, and cynical regarding the abuse of the utopian project as manifest in the megalomaniac impulses found in North Korean version of Brutalist architecture.<sup>10</sup>

But what does his contemplation on the notion of blowing up as explosion imply? Is he referring to the potential preemptive attack against the regime, resulting in destruction? Or an implosion of, or collapse from within, the regime? A metaphor for its foreboding? A possible or likely loss of the indices that constitute the images due

to destruction? Perhaps destruction drive that is inherent in archive, as suggested by Derrida via Freud?

Perhaps the work points to one of Derrida's theses that "the archive is made possible by the death, aggression, and destruction drive."<sup>11</sup> At a basic level an archive retains fragments of past memories, of events and lives passed away. Every life is governed by death drive, and archive is a record of death drive at work. One finds in various documents, photo albums, and souvenirs deposited in an archive unmistakable presence of death drive. Freud uses the terms destruction drive, aggression drive, and death drive interchangeably, and considers them "irreducible," while Derrida refers to them as "invincible necessity" in archive.<sup>12</sup> According to Derrida, archive fever is an archive-destroying death drive, anarchic (반아카이브적) force without its own trace.<sup>13</sup>

Back's work is archival in the sense that it appropriates the archival materials to work against the grain. He deconstructs the archive to undermine the meanings typically imbued upon it. *Utopia / Blow Up* (2009) is a case in point. An edition in the format of newsprint, it is a deceptively simple statement that utilizes the form of mass communication that eventually finds its domicile in the archive. Readers of the edition can begin from either end of the newsprint, as one side starts with *Utopia*, the other *Blow Up*. However, the implied narratives dialectically negate one another, and one is left with anxiety and uncertainty of not quite understanding the subject of the images. Whether the images have surreal, fantastic, or even curative way of grappling with the potentially destructive forces latent in them, they demonstrate that "the nature of all archive materials [is] found yet constructed, factual yet fictive, public yet private,"<sup>14</sup> and that the nature of archive is ultimately unstable.

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I began this essay thinking about the words picture and the archive. It would be appropriate to end with the multiple meanings of the phrase "out of." Of many possible meanings, in the context of Back's work, "out of" may simultaneously imply moving or situated away from pictures and the archive, or using them as a raw material, or having them as a motivation, and even not having enough recognition of them in this age of appropriation, hybridization, and proxies.

The sense of ambiguity that Back maintains in his political stance in regard to such "hot" topic of North Korea represents his "cool" approach to his practice of making photographic images. Just as his interest lies less in the miniature landmarks themselves than the structure of signification in *Real World I*, Back is less interested in North Korea than how we picture it and remember it in our unconscious. Like his Western predecessors, Back reminds us that pictures "have no autonomous power of signification (pictures do not signify what they picture); they are provided with signification by the manner in which they are presented." In this regard, Back's work

may be described as ruptured realism, for his images unsettle the meanings of the iconic pictures in the public consciousness.<sup>15</sup>

Back's exploration in production of images and their meanings in unconventional ways is carried out further in his most recent work using the archives of found images that he obtained through various means during his sojourn in the U.S. This time around Back intentionally relinquished his authorial power and allowed his assistant as proxy to select photographs that may be subject to appropriation and manipulation. Through his hybridizing practice of found images in the archives with his processes of manipulations and mixing his own photographs, he has come to point where he largely considers the images in the archive and his own "creation" nearly indistinguishable. What has come to the fore is a matter of choosing. For the deliberate act of making choices largely govern the direction of the work in which the artist moves with the flow of the nature of the pictures. The work of art is no longer a receptacle of creative expression; the artist is now situated in the receiving end of the pictures that present themselves with their rich histories and contexts. The crux of Back's project may be the question of how to sustain the dialectics between artistic autonomy, will to imagine and fantasize, while remaining sensitive to the context of the archive. The artist's task is recoding the text already embedded in the pictures. Which may explain why Back's photographic images, in their unanticipated return, at once appear to be familiar yet unsettling.

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Suki Kim for his generosity in sharing with me his thoughts on Back's work and being a wonderful interlocutor during the process of writing this essay.

<sup>2</sup> Haim Steinbach, in conversation "From Criticism to Complicity," *Flash Art*, no. 129, (1986), 46-9.

<sup>3</sup> Douglas Crimp, "Pictures," in *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, Brian Wallis, ed. (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), 175.

<sup>4</sup> Crimp, "Pictures," 186.

<sup>5</sup> Kim Sun Jung, "Interview with Back Seung Woo," in *Deferred Judgement* (Seoul: ArtSonje Center, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Sven Spieker, *The Big Archive: Art from Bureaucracy* (Cambridge: the MIT Press, 2008), 3.

<sup>8</sup> Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse," *October* 110, (Fall 2004), 22.

<sup>9</sup> Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Gerhard Richter's "Atlas": The Anomic Archive," *October* 88, (1999), 133-134.

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<sup>10</sup> The work shares certain affinity with the photomontage of French artist Nicolas Moulin who has produced images in which Brutalist architectural motifs are inserted into landscapes. Moulin has also appropriated the gigantic 105-story Ryugyong Hotel in Pyongyang as a motif in his installation art as well as film, entitled *Warmdewar*, 2006. Moulin describes Ryugyong Hotel in terms of “megalomaniac materialization of a utopia, a monument to the ‘monument.’” The following site was retrieved on March 1, 2011.

[http://www.galeriechezvalentin.com/fr/artistes/nicolas\\_moulin/](http://www.galeriechezvalentin.com/fr/artistes/nicolas_moulin/)

<sup>11</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 92.

<sup>12</sup> Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 9.

<sup>13</sup> Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 11.

<sup>14</sup> Foster, “An Archival Impulse,” 5.

<sup>15</sup> Crimp, “Pictures,” 185.