

The Punctumⁱ in Synthetic Realism

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A man in the painting glares at the audience. The portrait of this Dutch man is eminent, but his photograph is probably unknown to most people. This photo of Vincent van Gogh is an artist's transformation from a painted portrait, but Van Gogh has never left such a photograph of himself. The image of Van Gogh exhaling smoke is probably a figment of the artist's imagination, yet this painting by hand is as real as a photograph. Can it be that perhaps the artist possesses a photograph of Van Gogh that no one else in this world does?

The audience detects Photorealism in Hyung Koo Kang's work, but Kang is not a photorealist. Even though he admits that Chuck Close left an impression on his work, Kang's work is fundamentally different from Photorealism, which transfers the photo into a painting. This is because Kang's work is devoid of a preexisting photo of what is represented. In the case of Photorealism, the photograph is developed into a photorealistic work, so there is a certain subject that is represented. On the other hand, no matter how realistic Kang's images are rendered, the subjects of his portrayal do not actually exist.

This also makes a difference in how the work is produced. Using the reproductive technology of silkscreen, Andy Warhol employed the capitalistic society's method of mass production even to the final process in the making of his paintings. After Pop Art, the photorealists also used such mechanical procedures as the grid or slide projection. However, Kang's images lack indexicality. There are no such subjects to testify, photographs to transfer from, or film on which to trace. Therefore, one can say that his work is a craft.

His realism is achieved in the manner of absolute craftsmanship. Clearly, copying from a photo or a slide is more useful or essential in order to give a hyper-realistic rendering in an image. However, Kang clearly states that if he employs a mechanical means of reproduction, "the reason for the work's existence will disappear." The limited tool like the pinselⁱⁱ is not enough to give a photographic effect. Therefore, his work mobilizes all sorts of informal tools, such as airbrush, nails, drill, cotton swabs, toothpicks and erasers.

Photorealists subvert the relationship between the original and the copy, and claim that the photo is more real than the reality itself. Conversely, Kang's hyper-realism claims other objectives, because "to actualize things that do not exist, one needs the power of making it hyper-realistic." He does not strive to achieve reality, but attempts at the latency, possibilities and

potentiality. His works do not portray the reality more real than it actually is, and his photographs are no more real than the reality itself. Like what Lev Manovich said about computer graphics, it is just "a realistic representation of a different reality."

Kang asserts that "People recognize these portraits of famous people as photographs, but I do not draw famous faces. Instead, I fragment them, and then I reclaim the original through assembling." According to Roland Barthes, photography represents death, because it captures the moment and freezes it forever. Nevertheless, Kang restores life to his subjects through fragmenting the photograph. In the 'other reality' that Kang creates are Warhol and Monroe coexisting with and aging along those still living.

There rests an immense difference in the quantity of information between a painting and a photograph. Finding the kind of photographic resolution in a painting is like refiguring the dinosaur through its fossilized bones; the missing information must be filled in through imagination. Kang had to visually integrate countless number of images of elderly people in order to depict Da Vinci's wrinkles. Random faces of extras used in movies were integrated together to make Lincoln or Van Gogh's face in his work. In this sense, we can define his work as 'Synthetic Realism'.

Here we can see that Kang is embodying the fundamentals of computer graphics in an analogue way. Through the use of computer, the dinosaurs from the Jurassic Period take off from the state of being dead and fossilized, to live and move in front of our eyes. Using the digital technology, we can capture an individual's childhood face or his old-age face in a photograph. Furthermore, superimposing several photographs to make one image through the software such as Photoshop, has become an everyday activity for the mass in this digital age. Kang expresses that his work is similar in theory to the inkjet prints.

Until the 19th Century, the typical method of visual communication was the painting. In the 20th Century, this method was replaced by photography and film, which appealed to the public perception. Although a painting does not really require a subject, it lacks in realism. On the other hand, photography is realistic but must be accompanied by a subject. However, computer graphics endow the same kind of vividness as a photograph even in an image without a subject. For instance, the two CGI images in a screen or monitor unite to compose one image creation. This synthetic realism will represent the visual culture of the 21st century.

If Warhol's work resembles mechanical production through the use of silk screen to create advertising images, then Kang's work is similar to that of the computer graphic engineers in making movies, in the sense that he puts in a tremendous amount of work to increase the

resolution in his paintings. While Warhol predicted the masses' interest in image reproduction, Kang presents the people's interest in the fresh new image and the digital synthesis. Different from Warhol's expectations, today's masses create images using the computer, not reproduce images through silkscreen.

For Warhol to be a success, his work should be devoid of ambience. His work overthrows the aura in painting, and reflects on today's masses' inclination to "overcome the disposable nature of all objects" through intentionally mimicking at reproduction. On the contrary, Kang's work definitely has a kind of an aura. Where would that come from? Evidently, it comes from the piercing stares of the subjects in his work. Walter Benjamin's paper about Baudelaire reflects another definition of the aura, as the 'meeting of the eye contacts.'

At first it seems perplexing that Kang would now draw caricatures when his previous paintings were as real as photographs. These cold images like cartoons definitely do not serve other purposes than to capture the characteristics of the subject. Caricature captures and mimics an individual in a way that at the same time does not seem to resemble the subject at all. This helps the process of capturing the subject's most fundamental characteristics in the complex process of representation. Through roughly 600 sketches and studies, Kang realized that what determines the impression of a person is the area surrounding the eyes.

The stare penetrates the audience, and its power is prickling. The perceptibly tactile effect caused by the stare, and the resulting intimate relationship between the work and the audience define the 'punctum' situated in Kang's work. According to Roland Barthes, the photograph's punctum comes from indexicality, or from the things that actually existed. However, Kang's work rests on fiction. It is a lie that presents what was never there as something that once was. How can an image without indexicality have punctum?

Such possibility depends on how the meaning of reality has changed. Warhol's reality was made by reproducing. However, today's reality does not just rest on being reproduced but simultaneously being created or synthesized. Reality is no longer something given (datum). It is already something artificially synthesized (factum), created by digital production and composition. To the digital audience, the reality itself is taken as an image that is created and composed. Hyung Koo Kang's work illustrates that through the visual actualization, the synthetic reality can also have punctum.

ⁱ Purely personal and individual response to a photograph which 'pierces the viewer'

ⁱⁱ Pinsel is German which means a brush.