

## *Real World I, II*

Some words fulfill their functions satisfactorily unless their definitions are enriched and clarified by their antonyms. They are always accompanied provisionally by their opposites: digital by analog, fiction by non-fiction, dialog by monolog, utopia by dystopia. These pairs of words have simultaneously common and disparate semantic elements and thus the seemingly opposite definitions of them do not merely counter each other but necessitate each other to be fully understood. Seung Woo Back's early photographic series 'Real World' owes its pivotal significance to this aspect. What Back addresses through the use of the title of 'Real World' is nothing but his artistic will to delve into the relationship between the actual and the non-actual and between the actual and the unreal. Although *Real World I* and *Real World II* are differentiated by their apparent materials, the use of the same title for them is justified by their shared theme explained above.

*Real World I* shows a distant view in which world-famous architectures and historic monuments of various eras crowded, and *Real World II* is a photograph that depicts a close and distant view of a group of small soldiers who march in a dark space. Primarily, both works seem to present unrealistic worlds contrary to the expectations suggested by their titles. Yet more careful attention reveals that the worlds that these photographs deliver are real without being fabricated or concocted: one is produced by photographing the models at a miniature park located in a city in South Korea against the background of a real landscape; another shows toy soldiers forming a regular file in an actual location. The unrealistic worlds in these photographs are of reality having been created by using what actually exist. Compared to *Real World I* in which only the artist's choice of angle from a specific point is applied, *Real World II* is inflicted by a slightly more intervention of the artist as its scene is staged by the artist by arranging real objects. Yet both photographs employ the optical principle of photography of the objective capturing of the object by use of reflected rays. Nevertheless, viewers are unable to convince themselves whether the image in front of them shows something real or unreal. This uncertainty results from both the duality of today's photography and the contradictory conditions of modern society. Viewers tend to withhold their judgments while confusedly fluctuating between the common belief that a photograph represents the objective view of the object and the fact that it is not easy to discern what is affected by the processes of compounding and fabrication that are facilitated by the development of technology and attack the common belief. Moreover, whether what is contained in a photograph is real or unreal no longer attracts the attention of us who are living in the world that is inundated with the unrealities which perfectly conceal their unreality and the realities which are too unrealistic.

As examined so far, Back's *Real World I* and *Real World II* comments on the ambiguity of an image: what is real to Back himself is seen as unreal to most people, or most people see the photographs as portraying what is unreal although what the photographs are undoubtedly of reality. Furthermore, they demonstrate the basic artistic attitude of Back toward photography as an artistic medium in the modern sense that there is the possibility of infinite transformations and choices in spite of the limitation of photography that the image conveyed through a photograph cannot be real at all since a photograph shows a represented image of the real. It can be thus said that Back's 'Real World' Series reveals where his art started and suggests his matrixical identity as an artist.

## *Blow Up*

To speak my conclusion in advance, *Blow Up* raises the question of where authorial action stands in the realm of contemporary photography. Outwardly, it shows the views of a place in North Korea: people against the landscapes of Pyongyang. The fact that the location is North Korea is its simple subject matter and at the same time contributes to the deepening of its meaning by allowing the primary response of the viewer to defy the original intention of the artist. As the title suggests, the photographs of *Blow Up* are considerably indebted to the element of chance that is obtained through the partial enlargement of the photographs that the artist took. As is generally known, every photographer is supervised during the process of photographing by the North Korean authorities and the outcomes are also subject to their authorization. by the government, and thus it is implausible to say that the original photographs taken by Back render his own perspective since external intervention is imposed upon them. In addition, the photographs taken in North Korea are likely to show similar images regardless of who photographs them. Consequently, it is difficult to credit the origin of the existence of them to the artist despite that the agent who took them is the artist himself. In the case of *Blow Up*, authorial action lies in the decision and fabrication by the artist to take out the films after several years later and to obtain the final images by enlarging some images chosen among them tens of times larger. This brings to light symbolically the limit of the artist's intervention in the making of a photograph and tells that authorial action is not necessarily confined to the action of clicking the shutter of a camera at a particular moment but includes all the processes that occur subsequently. This is why *Blow Up* deserves to be valued as an attempt to extend the idiomatic range of the medium of photography.

*Blow Up* is regarded as a work of art unlike the photographs of North Korea that we have seen, and this owes totally to Back's choice and fabrication done after his actual photographing. The blurred images of *Blow Up* are more affectional and show exceptionally a large number of people in comparison to Back's other works. The reason lies not merely in the blurring effect but also more importantly in the aggressive intervention of the artist's subjective choice decided upon his intuition in the process of enlargement. Additionally, most of the chosen scenes concentrate on the details of the objects such as the faces and motions of the figures: the absent-minded or tense looks of two men in uniforms smoking cigarettes at a balustrade; the flushed face of a woman on the phone seen through a window; the rear view of a woman with long and rather stiff hair; the shoddy signboard in the middle of the building that says 'Optical Glass/Glasses/Direct Sales Store' and a tall tree next to the building; the portraits of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jeong Il installed side by side; a man sitting gallantly with folded arms and with a small Kim Il Sung badge on his ironed blue shirt. Clearly, the artist did not recognize these detailed images at the moment of photographing them. Tens of these detailed concrete images arouse particular sentiments both individually and in a group in the mind of the viewer. They implicitly provoke sadness, warmth and a smile. What is obvious is that the sentiments that 'he' intends to convey are some 'peculiar' ones that cannot be felt in other photographs of North Korea which 'they' want to show.

The 'Blow Up' Series is the result of the first effort of Back to prove that the post-photographing process of selecting some of already-existing founded images and of enlarging them can be crucial in the formulation of the meaning and sentiment of a work of art. It provided Back with a vital opportunity to explore and unfold such a creative attitude more vigorously.

## *Utopia*

Like *Blow Up*, *Utopia* also takes North Korea as its subject matter, but Back's intention here is different. In *Blow Up*, at least the ostensible signifier is clearly North Korea. On the contrary, that of *Utopia* is obscured and in consequence it seems to depict an 'imaginary utopia' which does not exist in reality. The clues that indicate North Korea can be detected here and there, yet the distortion of shapes and colors makes the overall image utterly unrealistic. The oppressive and domineering dystopia of North Korea is paradoxically presented as an ideal 'utopian' world.

A better understanding of *Utopia* can be achieved through the comparison with *Blow Up*. For although the difference between the two works can be compared to that between a documentary photograph and a composite one, the making processes of and the artist's intentions for both works are in the same continuum in the respect that the artist's intervention to founded images results in various transformations. Whereas the element of transformation is applied on the basis of the photographs that the artist took in person though under the external supervision and censorship in *Blow Up*, *Utopia* uses the found objects such as the propaganda postcards or posters made in North Korea from the outset. Furthermore, in the case of *Blow Up*, a rather passive mode of transformation is employed as the artist selects parts of the original images and enlarges them. For *Utopia*, however, the artist makes a more insistent use of the element of transformation by utilizing computer technology to distort the forms of some original images and to remove and reapply colors while generating unrealistic images. *Utopia* embodies the artist's intentional resolution to inquire into the subject matter of North Korea and the theme of the diversity in authorial involvement in a much more intensive way. Back found the materials of photographs for *Utopia* at a politically disoriented collectible shop in Japan where Bae Yong Joon as a figure representing South Korea and Kim Il Sung as that representing North Korea are equally regarded as typical images of both countries. Back's use of the images that he found at the store as the materials for *Utopia* evidences that North Korea is, to Back, not a political subject but a neutral one that corresponds to his personal interest and artistic intention. With respect to the experiment on the diverse modes of authorial intervention that can be applied to photography, *Utopia* boasts the strongest intensity in terms of transformation and distortion among the entire works of Back. Also, Back does not try to prevent the viewer from discerning such a fact. He makes an indirect reference to Russian Constructivism, which is characterized by the vertical composition through the repetition of the same element, by increasing the height of certain parts of a building exaggeratively or by reiterating identical sections so as to create a new building. The extreme contrast in color, which is obtained through the overall use of monochrome colors and the partial use of primary colors, is symbolic of the unrealistic reality of the dystopia of North Korea and simultaneously quotes the propagandous color schemes used in seditious posters whose purpose is to conceal such reality. What is clear here is Back's paradoxical intention to convert a dystopia into a utopia.

For this individual show, Back divided one of the images included in *Utopia* into 13 parts, sent them by wireless to 13 countries, printed them, sent each print back to South Korea and reassembled them into a large-scale photograph. In other words, *Utopia* underwent a series of processes of transmission and mailing, and this resulted in the materialistic differences between the prints that were put into in different countries. Then, the prints were recomposed. In result, it is separated from the earliest

photographic action of pressing the shutter to the extent that the backtracking on the processes applied to it is almost impossible.

### Seven Days

Back's 'Seven Days' Series consists of 21 photographs that were taken three times of a day for one week: *Monday Morning, Monday Afternoon, Monday Night, ..., Sunday Morning, Sunday Afternoon and Sunday Night*. We human beings perceive the continuous flow of time by dividing it into objective units such as the second, the minute, the hour, the day, the week, the month and so on for convenience sake. Then, is it indeed Back's calculated intention to point out the discrepancy between such a subjective experience and the artificial division of time by taking photographs three times a day for a week?

If you have understood the artistic attitude of Back to some extent, you can easily presume that Back is not inclined to use such a direct language. The photographs of this series obey not temporal rules but spatial ones regardless of what their titles suggest. The strategy employed for this work is the deliberate contradiction between the image and the content which is usually entailed by the title. For this work, Back first decided the titles and then took the photographs in the way that they were irrelevant to the titles within the limited space of Tokyo in accordance with certain rules of his own. In the beginning of this project, Back traced back to the places that he remembered from his past trips. As it developed, he went to the various places in Tokyo represented by certain symbolic architectures. Yet he avoided both the peculiar scenes of the places in his memories and the typical appearances of those symbolic buildings. Instead, he photographed what were seen immediately and unexpectedly to his eyes and excluded the photographs which contained some signs or information of what were photographed. Back frequents Tokyo for exhibitions or projects. Nonetheless, except a few places or people with which he is acquainted, the city is, to him, nothing but a spectacle that reveals to him only its outward appearance. The Tokyo seen in his eyes is subject to his biased interpretation in which the possibility of fallacy is latent. It is unquestionable that we usually tend to apply our superficial understandings and distorted interpretations to those spaces not of our living but of our transient stay. Back positively admits and reinforces through this work such a judgmental fallacy in regard to what is not familiar. The images of *Seven Days* show what Back's intuition and sensitivity seized, and thus they embody nothing but a subjective gaze upon the space of Tokyo which has nothing to do with the city's objective reality. They are not of the 'familiar Tokyo' which is frequently represented by the Tokyo Tower or the Roppongi Hills but of a 'new Tokyo' that stimulates certain emotions as a sight unfamiliar to both the artist and the viewer.

Ultimately, Back affirms the possibility of the fallacy that can be made in relation to an image through *Seven Days*. It operates itself in dual dimensions: within a photographic image; in the relationship between an image (a photograph) and text (a title). The signifier of the image that Back captured and we receive externally constantly disagrees with the substantial signified of the reality of Tokyo on one hand and on the other our naturalized expectation for the correspondence between a photograph and its title is demonstratively betrayed by the complete discrepancy between the spatial visual sign and the temporal textual one. Yet this disagreement and betrayal are the most distinct virtues and cruxes of this work. For an abundant quantity of meanings continue to spring through this fissure.

## *Archive Project*

The word 'archive' refers to a depository where the objective records such as photographs are placed or the collection of them. Thus, it can be said that the essential criteria of an archive are the 'objectivity' of the collection and the 'accumulation' of time. In *Archive Project*, Back poses questions to the absolute status of the photographic attribute of objectivity and the way we think of accumulated images. In other words, he uses the element of an archive to cast a doubt on the artistic value of an archive.

*Archive Project* is mostly of the objective records of particular spaces which are deprived of human traces such as the machines in a factory which are not being operated or the ruins under (re)construction. It can be easily assumed that Back reclassified the photographs that he brought from the archive of a certain organization or individual in accordance with certain rules and standards. Yet these photographs are not the objective records selected from an archive. Instead, they are of Back's creativity having been newly reborn through his own artificial fabrication applied to his own archive in which photographs of different agents, different moments and different places are mixedly contained. The archive that Back constructed includes many kinds of photographs as follows: photographs of a factory and a quarry under renovation in the U. S.; those in the existing archive of his whose scope encompasses various periods and regions including the photographs of Kyeongseong Textile Factory, which was the first factory of South Korea; those for Back's personal project that deals with the changes in a public organization and a factory that are to be soon reconstructed; those that Back has newly taken for this *Archive Project*. Back changed the colors and frames of these images of different origins by use of computer technology in order to recompose them in the way that they can be considered as photographs from an existing archive. That is, the viewer is forced to accept these photographs as the records of actual happenings, as photographs of similar kinds in terms of spatial usage, composition or impression are placed abreast and the fragments of unrelated photographs are combined into a single photograph. The deliberate effort of the artist to conceal the seams or to unify the overall color and tone is not needed for viewers to perceive them as images of the same kind or a single image, owing to the general belief on the nature of photography to record objective reality and the habitual tendency that has been formed by one's experience of numberless images registered in the histories of painting and photography.

Meanwhile, *Archive Project* also implicitly remarks on the fact that such objectivity of photography and the customary property of time inhibit one to presume that the views that are seen through the lens of the camera cannot be especially original in appearance. It emphasizes that someone still clicks the shutter of a camera to pursue his or her own pure impulse to depict something newer in a more attractive and inimitable way, yet they are unfailingly to be classified under a similar category when they are placed in a widest spectrum of time-space. That is, it sheds light on the indifference between photographs by different agents, and this leads to the forfeit of the photographer's 'authorial' status. This might be regarded as negating the medium of photography. It denies, however, not photography itself but the modernist vision to look into the originality and potential of photography only in the limited dimension of external form, and at the same time antagonizes the 'authorism' of modernist photography that confines the authoriality of a photographer to the act of photographing.

## *Memento*

In *Memento* (2001), a film directed by Christopher Nolan, the hero suffers from amnesia due to an accident and thus cannot store new memories in his brain more than 10 minutes. The hero tries to trace back his forgotten memories by taking photographs, making memos and tattooing on his own body. Ordinary people, whose brain can store their memories for a much longer period, need 'mementoes,' which refer to certain objects through which they can remind of the specific moments or places of the past. A photograph is one of the most representative mementos. Yet the vivid present of the moment that a photograph recorded becomes the past with the lapse of time, and the sensations and sentiments that one felt at that moment vaporize and his or her memories fade and alter although the photograph remains as a sort of index that marks the existence of such a moment.

Back's *Memento* tells how the memories which are dependent on photographs are limited and easy to be distorted. The alteration and distortion of memories start already at the moment of pressing of the shutter. As soon as a photograph leaves the hands of who photographed it, of who is photographed or of people who are related with them, it becomes a visual image of neutrality which is divorced from their memories and is the object of all kinds of subjective interpretations and meanings. For this work, Back collected photographs of numerous individuals that were stripped of their function as mementoes and placed them under a totally new context. He bought tens of thousands of mounted slides at the flea markets in different cities in the U. S., selected 2700 slides out of them and developed them. Then, he asked each of 16 people including himself to choose and arrange 8 photographs. The choices and arrangements by those 16 people had been made in accordance with each person's causes and criteria such as unexplainable emotional enticements or certain narrative reconstructions. They become the agents who created those photographs by choosing 8 photographs for each and endowing their own meanings and interpretations upon them. Back gave each person a box in which the 8 photographs that he or she chose were contained and told her or him to write a date of her or his choice. Then, he recollected the 16 boxes of photographs and placed them on 16 tables separately. Hence, the viewer is made to see the photographs that have nothing to do with their origins having been given new contexts. The dates written on them are the hints through which one can figure out those new contexts and at the same time what decoy the viewer to drift apart from such origins.

Among Back's works of art, in fact, *Memento* is inflicted with his intervention as an artist that is least photographic. That is, the final outcome of his artistic efforts that is shown to the viewer is a photograph, yet it neither is taken nor is physically transformed by the artist himself. What is done by Back is nothing but offering a large number of people with an opportunity to pick and arrange photographs of their own choice from the archive that is produced through the processes of collecting images and making an initial selection (though Back himself also participated in the picking and arranging processes). Seung Woo Back asks the viewer: who is the creator of the photograph in front of you?; is what you are looking at at this very moment indeed a truth? *Memento*, which stands farthest from the photograph 'worthy of the name', is a photograph 'about photography' that inquires into the nature of photography as an art form or into how far photography can go in the road of creativity.