

Seung Woo Back's Double Vision - David Company

This book brings together two different projects by Seung Woo Back. *Real World* is a set of photographs made in a South Korean theme park. *Blow up* is a series of enlargements derived from photographs taken in North Korea. In each case the photographic technique Back has chosen is as different as the subject matter. Nevertheless the projects are united by the same concerns. What does it mean to make photographs of nationality? And how do we make sense of those photographs?

Back's images of the theme park Aiinsworld in Seoul seem uncannily right and wrong at the same time. Technically they are perfect examples of the 'straight photograph'. They are frontal, rectilinear, in deep focus, balanced, orderly and shot in smooth, flat light. This is the non-style favoured by architectural photographers promising to present their subject matter in the simplest, clearest terms. A stable perspective is established allowing the space and the surfaces to be described soberly and coherently. Yet within Back's views there are contradictions. The photographs might be straight but *Real World* is not. Behind the image of Paris's Notre Dame we glimpse Kuala Lumpur's Petronas Towers. In another the same towers seem to stand tall beside the twin towers of New York's World Trade Center (now a monument to the disappearance of the real one). In another the waters surrounding Manhattan are fringed with Hong Kong junks. This is almost a photographic form of Sigmund Freud's dreamwork. *Real World* is a lucid dream of global displacements and condensations. Here real geography gives way to the spatial fantasy of an ideologically motivated mental map.

The kind of hyperreal superficiality on offer to the visitors at Aiinsworld has always been a reliable sign, or more exactly an authentic symptom, of modernity. Aiinsworld belongs to the history of global theme parks and museums that stretches back into the nineteenth century. Confident and ambitious nations have asserted their nationalism and their internationalism by miniaturising and incorporating the world beyond their borders. Perhaps the most renowned of these parks was the Exposition Coloniale Internationale held in Paris in 1931. It attracted 34 million visitors in six months. Within its extensive grounds the citizens of France and neighbouring countries could wander through remakes of landmarks and typical structures to be found across the French empire, from Cambodia's Ankor Wat to Tunisia's minarets.

IMAGES - from *Le plus beau voyage a travers le monde, souvenir Catalogue of the Exposition Coloniale Internationale, Paris 1931*

1 - View of the Grand Avenues of the French Colonies
2 - Tunisian Section - The Marabout and the Minaret



Today those older colonial empires have almost disappeared. They are giving way to the hegemony of international capitalism. In this new situation nationalism is itself the façade, the quaint pretense that hides fact of near-borderless exchange. This new world order depends upon the speculative washing around the world of money, goods and people - seeking leisure if they are fortunate, seeking work if they are not. We might compare Back's *Real World* with Jia Zhangke's film *The World* (2005). Set in a similar park in Beijing, China, it explores the complex relationships between the young staff. They come from many countries including post-Glasnost Russia. In fact they are as internationally mixed as the park's attractions and its visitors. But while the park tries to offer seamless transitions for the visitors as they glide by monorail between the world's monuments without the need for passports, the staff live their lives through their cultural and economic differences, unable to 'fit in', unable to fully identify with the fantasy of the global dream. The 'message' of the film is similar to the message suggested by Back's *Real World*. Appearances, seductive as they are, ought not to be trusted and the supposed transparency of the new internationalism can be blinding.

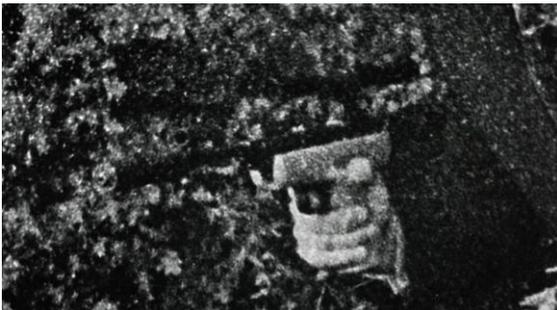
IMAGES - stills from *The World* (Jia Zhangke 2005)



Back's *Real World* takes up the neutral photographic style only to undermine it through the choice of subject matter and point of view. The series *Blow-up* undoes itself in a very different way. First of all the title 'Blow-up' turns a very particular photographic process into vital part of the meaning of the work. But what is the meaning of a blow up? What is at stake in this familiar technique? Essentially a blow up is an image made in two separate stages. The initial taking of the shot is followed by what we might call a 'secondary revision' (another Freudian term). A blow-up may imply that the original photograph was too generous, that it included much more than the important information. It may imply that the photographer could not be as close to the subject as they wished and had to compromise with a more distant shot, enlarging a section afterwards. Or it may imply the opposite, that the significant details were not even noticed at the moment the photo was taken but became important only later. This of course is the basis of Michelangelo Antonioni's famous film *Blow up* (1966), in which a series of harmless photographs of a quiet London park turn out to be potential evidence of a murder. The photograph may carry more meanings and speak of more

truths and untruths than the photographer can ever grasp or control when the image is shot.

IMAGES Stills from *Blow up* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1966)



We cannot be sure of the circumstances of Seung Woo Back's blow ups, so we cannot be sure of their meanings. Moreover Back evokes different types of blow up. Some are shots of young performers on stages. The grainy enlargements suggest they derive from photos by members of the audience, perhaps friends or family sitting far back in large concert halls or theatres. Others have the feeling of surveillance images in which wide shots of public spaces have been scrutinised for telling details. Some look as if they derive from old family album photos - perhaps lost or discarded - which Back has then re-viewed. In fact all the images were taken by Back himself on earlier trips to North Korea. The blow-ups were indeed a result of his re-viewing those images much later. But what are we to make of the details he has enlarged? Is he looking for something specific? Something typical? Something unusual? Something hidden? Is he looking to simplify the meaning of the original photographs, or to complicate them?

In the English language the phrase to 'blow-up' can mean two different things: to *destroy* or to *enlarge*. One can blow up a building or a bridge; one can blow up an image. In some ways the two meanings are not so far apart. Any photographic blow up is the creation of a new image through the destruction of its older self. But the older self still remains as a partially visible origin. Back seems to recognise this and the title of the series draws our attention not just to what is in the image but what is excluded and implied. Is Back's gesture an attempt to somehow overcome his original photographs? Is it a sign of a rethinking about why and how they were taken? Did he feel they were too bland, too accepting of a North Korean 'point of view'? Is the blow up an attempt to regain control? Did the fact of his being in the North restrict his vision? Did the act of looking again at his images - in another time and space - redefine them? Did he change his mind about what was significant? If so, what actually changed? The image? Memory? Culture? History? Ideology? Do the details in the blow ups really tell us something? Or are the details less significant than the process of blowing up, understood as a metaphor for secondary revision in general?

Real World concerns South Korea's aspirant global cosmopolitanism. This is the cultural manifestation of its entry into international capitalism. The visual logic of this culture is, as we know all too well, excess, spectacle, distraction and consumption. *Blow up* is the opposite, a project concerned with one nation's isolation and the attendant fantasies about its inside and outside that keep it separate from rest of the world. And while the physical border between North and South is well policed, the psychological border can never be quite so concrete. Bound together in one book *Real World* and *Blow up* are a joint testament to this condition.