

Probing into Authorial Fiction, In/visibility, and Cultural Landscapes: Seung Woo Back's Photography

Sohl Lee, Art critic based in Seoul and Rochester

Sohl Lee (SL): After your undergraduate degree in photography, you started a career in commercial photography in Korea. And later, you went to the U.K. for further studies in theory and practice. Can you talk about your training and professional background? Has your relationship with the camera shifted since you became an 'art photographer' or simply, an artist?

Seung Woo Back (SB): I worked briefly as a fashion photographer during my undergraduate years. Back then, my dream was to become a commercial photographer. However, it was hard for me to adjust to the fast turnover cycle of commercial photography, and I was always, in an unexpected way, left with a strange feeling of emptiness. While studying 'fine art photography' in graduate school in Seoul, I left for London without specific plans (for reasons that I myself do not know) as if to have been led by some unknown forces. I did my graduate work in fine art at Middlesex university. The time I spent in London was really helpful for starting my career as an artist, opposed to a photographer. There were advantages to studying photography in Korea during college, but sometimes it limited my artistic creativity to a certain level, perhaps like a double-edged sword. I think the fact that in London I studied both theory and practice in a broader sense (rather than the more narrowly defined discipline of photography) was a great experience that allowed me to find balance in my own practice. Now I prefer to be called an artist rather than a photographer.

SL: Are there any thinkers, artists, or filmmakers whose works you admire or whose ideas have sparked inspiration for you? Do you have any favorite fictional characters? (I ask this since you mentioned that you were infatuated with watching films at one point.)

SB: I don't know... There are so many, yet no particular name comes to mind now. I personally take inspiration from everyday conversations more so than other works of art. I am a cynical person. Sometimes that becomes an issue in my social life and personal relationships, but it is a useful trait when it comes to telling my own stories. For example, when I watch films, I have a hard time focusing on the story that the director wants to convey. Rather, my imagination and curiosity causes me to wonder not about the relationships that the director is trying to portray, but about the untold stories and connections. I guess this is not the best attitude that one would expect from a spectator, but I am not always pleased with the way in which directors try to catch the viewers' attention and sometimes guide the viewers to a certain direction. Quite often, I understand films in my own way, and that is probably because I am not well-versed in films, but I prefer to stay like that. In a similar vein, I like the medium of photography because it gives the viewers more leeway on personal interpretation.

SL: The series *Real World I* seems to me a landscape of irony, the mechanism of irony being a simultaneous representation of a sign and its opposite. Can you tell us more about what made you start photographing the AiinsWorld theme park and any particular way in which you wanted to capture the scenes there? Why, for example, are human figures absent in your photographs of tourist sites? Is the theme park an interesting site since it delineates and exaggerates the boundaries between fiction and reality, or are you saying something more than just representing these boundaries?

SB: The common thread that runs through all my work is firstly, my interest in what is considered real or unreal when seen from the surface, and secondly, my interpretation of stories that are constructed by someone else. I think the *Real World* series expresses this most clearly. The AiinsWorld

theme park puts forth innumerable fakes as real, my photographs amplifying the sense of irony even more since they are titled as the *Real World*. The Korean landscape that functions as the background for the replica buildings is real, but the fake scenery that insists on its truthfulness actually does look more real.

It is the city of Paris that first launched a 'tourist package' of travelling the world while staying in the same city. The French brought back to Paris cultural relics and famous architecture from its colonies and eventually opened a 'miniature museum' in its capital. If 'the West' as the self-proclaimed superior spectator took interest in 'our cultures' by casting its eyes downward on 'us,' the *Real World* is the product of our fantasy about Western cultures, whether the enterprise began simply for profiteering or if it is the symptom of the lack of confidence in our own culture. We are expected to look up to these buildings and take photographs with our happiest faces, as if we are visiting the actual places. The theme park also becomes a space filled with irony. The Egyptian obelisk in front of the White House does exist in Washington D.C. The fact that it really does exist over there amplifies the irony. Such a contradiction that resides in the American capital is not much different from another contradiction that arises from the miniature buildings that proudly stand in front of Korean high-rise apartments. These contradictions are no longer contradictions when they are continuously repeated they become real, and thus reality. Rather than hiding them, I wanted to show these contradictions in a clear and straightforward way, by naming the series as *Real World*. I intentionally excluded people from my work, because I thought that their presence may alter the essence of my story. I do not want to define or delineate the boundary between fiction and reality, because that can result in a case in which I impose a certain reading on to the viewers.

SL: Can you tell us about where and how you photographed the *Real World II* series and any episodes involved in the picture-taking process? I am also wondering about the staging effect here. It is you the artist who orchestrates the performance in *Real World II*.

SB: *Real World II* was mainly shot in England, Japan, and the U.S. If I chose England because I had a personal connection with the country (through my education there), the U.S. and Japan are the two countries in which the modern Korean nation has the most complex historical and cultural relationships. The decision to make this series came out of an insignificant personal experience: during my stay in London, people took no interest in me, because I was a guy from a lesser-known country in Asia. This situation had its own merits, but for the most part it was very hard on me. Then one day, people started to take interest in me, and asked me some questions: if I had been in the army, if I was from a country that is still at war, if I had shot a real gun, if I had taken part in a war, if I had actually killed someone, or had been nearly killed myself.

In a sense, war for me at the time was living and working in London, a reality filled with continued struggles from language barriers and cultural differences. I wondered why people thought that war consists of only those things that are visible to us. During that time, I started collecting miniature soldiers from different countries for no particular reason. I brought them outside at night, staged them in ordinary places, and took photographs of them. I was also working on the *Blow Up* series at the time, and I will discuss the relationship between the two series when I talk about *Blow Up* later.

SL: To me, if *Real World I* captures a park of entertainment and spectacle on a sunny day, *Real World II* tells more about a gloomy and dark side of reality which looms over us in dreams.

SB: The reason I shot the photographs at night is because I wanted to choose the quietest time of the day. I shone a flashlight over the toy soldiers rather

than using a more intense light source, and observed their play and relationships for hours. The overall tone was a bit dark and dull, maybe because I mainly relied on the light from the surroundings. Except for Japan, because street lights in Tokyo are brighter than any other city in the world.

SL: *Real World II* seems to chart new boundaries in the world, performing wars in everyday places like residential neighborhoods, parking lots, telephone booths, etc. This series echoes what you previously said about your experience of watching films, in that you are curious about the stories that remain untold in films and that your art allows you to render visible the previously invisible stories. The medium of photography in this case allows the co-existence of an indexical reality (the settings of modern buildings without much nation or locational traits) and the playful staging of toys. Here, the untold stories of everyday life could be war in disguise of play or play in disguise of war. Either way, the sense of violence in these stories seems accentuated by the dim light in the dark setting.

Another photography series that you were simultaneously working on, *Blow Up*, also has a certain sense of violence embedded in both its content and process. Can you tell us about the *Blow Up* series, which indirectly engages with the remnants of the Cold War and the Korean War and which at the same time directly converses about the reality of division on the Korean peninsula? What attracted you to North Korea in the first place, and how did you visit Pyongyang?

SB: I visited Pyongyang for a month in 2000. Obviously, it is close to impossible for a South Korean citizen to visit Pyongyang, whether it is for tourism or anything else. The only possible way is to obtain the South Korean government's permission for a single visit. In my case, I went to Pyongyang as a member of the press during inter-Korean cultural events. During my visit, I did not have a project like *Blow Up* in my mind. I just had a vague sense of longing or excitement that people usually have about places they are visiting for the first time. Simply put, I think I visited Pyongyang with a typical attitude of a photographer: I had a vague desire to take as many photographs as possible of places and things that others had not been able to capture. As with all foreign photographers in North Korea, I had a guard that followed me around everywhere. He wanted me to shoot only the images that North Korea wished to show to the rest of the world. And every night, they confiscated all the negatives that were shot during the day in order to develop them and return them the next day. Many frames in the negatives were censored and cut out. I could not visit the city the way I wanted to, and even the photographs that I took in permitted places were censored. As a result, my photographs were not very different from those taken by others who had visited Pyongyang before. I thought to myself with a sense of disappointment: at the end of the day the person who was censoring my photographs was perhaps the real artist behind the curtain. Upon my return to Seoul, this thought led me to put away hundreds of film rolls from Pyongyang in a box. Time passed, and it was 2004. I was working on *Real World II* at that time when I started sorting out the negatives from Pyongyang and came across details in the photographs which I had not noticed at the time of shooting. I developed all of them in A4 size, looked for hidden elements and stories that I had previously not been able to see, and then blew them up.

SL: The process of selecting portions of existing images in order to blow them up to make different photographs reminds me of Roland Barthes's notions of *studium* and *punctum*. The initial photographs only contained elements of the *studium* and lacked the *punctum*, until you turned them into the *punctum* by the subsequent process of selecting and blowing them up. It seems that this act helped you insert your own subjectivity and personal interpretation into the photographs. What becomes important in this gesture of inserting your individual perspective into images of North Korea? I detect a deep sense of resistance to the sociopolitical contexts in which your initial photographs had to look similar to other photographs of North Korea that are circulated in today's mediascape. At the same time, this creative process of making photographs is deeply embedded in the final work, giving an

equal weight to both the process and the result.

SB: As Barthes said, the *punctum* is the detail that pierces me in my most private appreciation of a photograph on an emotional level. In a way, the blown up pictures may show the details that I was most drawn to. They are fragments that have been selected through the most subjective gaze — that of mine — and when these pieces are put together again into a group, a sort of *aura* is created. This work is neither a documentation of reality nor the reality itself. It is simply that which flees away. From the viewer's point of view however, the photographs can be read as blow ups of images that are already devoid of objectivity yet are thought-provoking. In that sense, the photographs for the viewer can contain elements of the *studium*. In other words, the viewer may read the images as credible and objective.

The process of looking for hidden details in *Blow Up* made me feel like I was on an excavation. The rediscovered images have an indexical relationship with the North Korean setting at the time of shooting, but here they were, telling me many, conflicting stories. An image can contain divergent stories within its frame, sometimes a main storyline working along with multiple alternative ones. As a matter of fact, the city of Pyongyang is like a huge film set. The big, impressive buildings are so quiet, with no trace of people that one can gather from outside. Like the miniature buildings in *Real World I*, I felt like these buildings in North Korea were mere show-offs to impress the viewers. By looking at the crowd moving across and within the city, I could feel that they were somehow being controlled by someone else. In that sense, they resemble the toy soldiers that I staged in *Real World II*. I got the feeling that I was standing in the middle of the movie set of *The Truman Show*, and this feeling was creeping its way up to the surface of my work.

SL: You are right. What seems most significant about this series are the mechanisms with which you re-work with your own photographs and the very processes through which *Blow Up* takes its current form. What you described as *aura* of the work lies neither on the surface of the photographs (document) nor in the subjects that they depict (reality); but rather, it resides in the intersection between the two. And this interstitial space of interaction, I believe, locates itself in the form that *Blow Up* photographs had to have taken in the given circumstances of socio-politics to which your creative process responds. Unlike your other series, many photographs in the *Blow Up* series contain human figures, making them resemble portraits rather than landscapes. It seems to me that there is a possibility for viewers to establish a certain ethical relationship with these photographed subjects.

SB: My previous works rarely contain people. I personally like taking photos of people, but I had been intentionally excluding them from my work because I feared that they could divert the flow of my stories. For this particular body of work however, I thought that people could tell more stories than their surroundings could ever do. There is another reason that I can think of: this time I did not control the images myself during the shooting. I simply edited and re-printed existing photographs.

SL: When showing the *Blow Up* series, you display multiple 20 by 24 inch photographs from the series in a grid-like format. Can you explain this exhibition strategy? Why do you prefer presenting them together as a group oppose to displaying them as singular large-scale photographs?

SB: In the case of the *Blow Up* series, I printed each image in two different sizes: the smaller of the two is uniformly sized as 20 by 24 inch; and the dimension of the bigger print varies for each image. I tried to reconfigure the display depending on the exhibition space. For example, at a small exhibition venue, I installed forty small images as a group. I chose this particular way of exhibiting the series because I believe that these images as a

collective of captured moments tell a different story than when they are exhibited singularly as separate, individual entities.

SL: It seems to me that the *Blow Up* series needs to be shown together, meaning that multiple photographs must be displayed side by side for them to tell the viewers their stories. I am fascinated by this viewing condition. As you rightly said, your *punctum* has become my *studium*. My objective gaze with pleasure and polite interest yet without delight and pain is however intrigued by the bigger frame within which forty images interact with one another. The North Korean subjects or their untold stories kept in smaller frames seem to compose a larger, dynamic picture. Our inability to form an ethical, affective relationship with them or our collective longing for a direct relationship with these ‘other’ subjects and places is perhaps visualized here. In that sense, *Blow Up* can be read as a powerful photographic manifestation of a long-overdue search for collective-building across border and beyond historical trauma.

Perhaps, with the advent of the *Utopia* series, you can now no longer deny the fact that representation of North Korea takes a strong presence in your art. Can you tell us about the creation process, especially about where and how you obtained the mass produced propaganda materials and how you inserted your own visual play to the existing materials?

SB: Whenever I start a project, I always try to depart from ‘objective’ documents. The same goes for *Utopia*, which has its visual basis on original photographs that were shot and printed by the North Korean authority. I discovered these materials on North Korea at a store that I fortuitously came across in Japan, where I found a vast array of history books, images, posters, drawings, etc., all made in North Korea. I felt very confused looking through these materials, because the reality that they (North Koreans) believe in — in other words, the truth promulgated by them — was different from the truth in which I believe. It was from then that I started collecting propaganda photographs from North Korea.

It is impossible to find personal photographs taken by North Koreans. What I mean by this is that all photographic images from North Korea are in fact images of what they (read as both the North Korean authority and people) believe to be of themselves, how they would like to be portrayed, and the ‘truth’ that they want to show. That is exactly what made me think that these images are the very documentations of a certain reality. So I collected them, and instilled a bigger, more exaggerated fantasy in them. I turned ten story buildings into thirty story buildings, and transformed pompous buildings into even grander ones. My motivation was not that of sympathy or cynicism. As the project progressed, I found that the project had begun with a simple question of “what if...?” but it was slowly metamorphosed into my own private utopia. As most of the original photos were in black and white, I added colors to the final works to make them appear even less realistic, and the colors that I chose resemble those used in propaganda posters during the Cold War. In the end, all these appropriations become part of my own story.

SL: The excess of emotion, obsession with myth-making, and infatuation with fantasy in your images remind me of a piece of information that I gathered by talking to the owner of the Japanese store. On a trip to Tokyo, I was curious to visit the store you had previously told me about. The store looked like a cabinet of curiosity, with its collection of encyclopedias and books published in North Korea or about North Korea, propaganda posters, embroideries, music CDs and cassette tapes from North Korea, DVDs of South Korean blockbusters with North Korean theme, etc. During a brief conversation with the owner, I discovered that the main customers were Japanese with ‘North Korea mania’. In a sense, I thought we all have contracted ‘North Korea mania’. Here I am thinking about how North Korea is more a ‘hot topic’ for international media outlets than, let’s say, South Korea. The

further away we are from North Korea, the more exaggerated our myth-making process of North Korea becomes. We have become more qualified, better myth-makers of North Korea than the North Korean propaganda unit, but of course with different intentions and for different reasons. You recently published a photography book that included *Blow Up* and *Utopia*, which resembles the format of an artist book. How did this project come about, and why did you put these two series together? Do you think the setting of reception changes the viewers' understanding of your work? If so, how?

SB: I put the two series together for quite a simple reason — they share a common subject matter. It was in the format of newspaper, a medium with self-proclaimed objectivity, that I published the images of my own personal discovery, distortion and re-interpretation. (I finalized this format after discussing it with Jeong Eun Kim, the editor-in-chief of IANN magazine who published the book.) This format in and of itself is a conveyor of truth, if you will. In my book, lies pretend to be the most truthful. That does not mean that the content of the book is a lie; rather, I hope that the viewers, unlike myself who feel confused, can discern differences in multiple truths and generate different interpretations that maintain distance between one another. At first, the viewers may be drawn intrinsically to the images, but they will always end up filling the images with their own imagination.

SL: Can you tell us about the new work for which you are using a fax machine? What materials do you choose to fax to the gallery space? What made you decide to expand your medium to include fax papers? How is this work positioned in the context of your larger body of works?

SB: I thought about using a fax machine for the upcoming exhibition, because this format allows me to create work that complements my overall body of work. I realize that my artistic process of distorting and altering reality is in and of itself a process of creating a reality or making it real. So I wanted to package the stories in a more objective and realistic way. In this regard, I was interested in the fact that facsimiles are usually documents that prove something and are transmitted to different places. Throughout the exhibition period, I plan to send all the documents that I gather and produce as my own research materials to fax machines that are installed on the gallery wall. Since I will use outdated fax machines that use thermal fax paper, the images will disappear over time in a similar way in which the texts on receipts fade away. I will simply repeat this process during the exhibition. The documents will include photographs, texts, and maybe some drawings. This project, rather than forming a separate series, will complement my entire body of work and draw people closer to my stories.

SL: Sounds like this work is a warm invitation to your art world. What kind of research materials do you plan on sending to the gallery?

SB: I hope people will take it that way. For the exhibition, in addition to the images that will be sent to the fax machines, I plan to display a separate archive box. Regarding the materials that I will send to the gallery, they will include research texts that I found online or from books, images that I composed, and documents that reckon with the 'hot topic' of North Korea from different national perspectives. All the materials will be sent to the gallery in no particular order.

SL: How is photography as a medium situated in the current Korean arts scene? How does this location of photography affect your work and its reception?

SB: Well, what seems clear to me is that photography has long lost its initial role of conveying truth. In a way, this shift has allowed the medium of photography to enter into the category of art. I also believe that the distinction between photographers and artists will become more clear. As for me, photography is just another useful medium that I can use — nothing more, nothing less.