

1. Surface-Façade Subjects

What kind of subject should a photographer focus on if he wished to develop the characteristics of the contemporary era objectively and plainly, using photography? And suppose that the nature of the contemporary era is extremely subjective, abstract, and sentimental, characterized by an 'absence of interiority' or 'anxiety that cannot be hidden'? (transparent anxiety) The medium of photography aside, this condition of contemporariness might be reduced to mere numbers using a statistical index from a sociologist's point of view, or from a psychiatrists' standpoint, pathological symptoms and conditions such as depression, obsession or schizophrenia may be presented. But I struggle to find a way to represent these subjective, abstract, and sentimental things using photography. Photographs of the city night scenes of a forest of high-rise buildings brilliantly glowing with neon signs could emblemize the destitute interior of the life here-now indulging in product fetishism and extreme capitalism. Moreover, out of focus images, irregular framing, extreme lighting and colour could act as a metaphor for the anxious psychology hidden deep beneath the contemporary life. However, my initial question asked, in a literal sense, what would a photographer photograph in order to visualize 'absence of interiority' and 'exposed anxiety' without using any investigational methods? How would a photograph, reveal this condition by indirectly applying 'studium' – to borrow Roland Barthes's terminology, this conventionality of photography? Though I may sound flat or dull, I think the answer lies in the rather short history of photography with its most stereotypical subject known as the 'face of a contemporary individual'.

2. Façade –the inner surface of portrait photography

Many are already familiar with Hein-kuhn Oh's past photographic projects including Korean 'Ajumma' and 'Girls', but before that, he also photographed 'Americans' in America and 'actors' or 'passerbys' in the streets of Itaewon. Hence, the individuals in Oh's photographic work can be understood in many different ways, ranging from their anthropological significance, socio-cultural awareness, or through aesthetic realization. However, it is perhaps most important to discuss the concept of 'indexicality' in Hein-kuhn Oh's photographic series. Indexicality is the decisive concept that transforms the subjective judgment in the photographs (in this case, I am specifically referring to the works by the artist tied under the theme of Makeup Anxiety in this book) into an objective image. Furthermore, indexicality is also the element that reveals the hidden meaning of the images.

The depicted subjects: a white woman who somehow resembles Marilyn Monroe, a Korean Ajumma whose shiny makeup bares through, a long-haired school girl with a prim expression, Twist Kim in Itaewon holding a rather exaggerated pose are all existing individuals who, through Hein-kuhn Oh's photographs, become indexical images that distinguishes the individuals according to specific categories of identity. According to semiotician Charles Peirce, index is a symbol "whose identifiers – that makes it a symbol – are lost when the actual subject is physically absent". In short, index is a symbol whose meaning is formed only when the physical subject

and the symbolic subject form a relationship. Examples include bullet markings on a wall or fingerprints on the identity card. Therefore, Hein-kuhn Oh's photographic portraits can only be produced with the subject's physical and bodily existence. In conclusion they are indexes. (With that in mind, all photographs are index images). But as I mentioned earlier, indexicality of Hein-kuhn Oh's images are not limited to solely to this explanation. To explain further, individuals in the photographs 'develop' as the index of existence of their physical, psychological, emotional, organizational, generational, and habitual characteristics. At times, that developed image establishes symbolic meaning such as a "northwestern American woman who has portrayed herself as a stereotypical woman in a Hollywood film" or an "audacious, apathetic and mischievous women called a Korean Ajumma". Thus, what we should focus on is not the reduction of the individual's 'existence' into a conceptual number, nor a sampling of their 'identity' into statistical figures, but the process in which the existence of the subject and their state was captured using light as a processing tool.

It appears that Hein-kuhn Oh is surveying these individuals of the contemporary era as subjects only made of facades without interiority. It also appears that he has perceived a sense of 'anxiety' from his subjects, whether they are an Ajumma, a school girl, an unpopular actor, an Ajushi (middle-aged men) or a gay man. One must consider Oh's repeated use of the word 'façade' to refer to an individual's face, which is originally an architectural term denoting the 'front side of the building'. Furthermore, one must also observe that the photographs are the outcome of strictly 'expressionless faces' that Oh drew out of his subjects, his viewpoint and judgment appears very stern and obstinate.

The front and back side is one of a pair, as is interior and exterior. The relationship between the two pairs, however, is structurally different. Front and back sides are constructed like flat sheets of paper, interior and exterior spaces consist of a 3-dimensional volume. Therefore, we can understand more clearly his intentions of using the word 'façade', which, to my understanding, presents the people here-now as 'surface-façade subjects made of only the external surface'. In particular, what is interesting here is the idea that 'lack of interiority lies at the surface', is a dialectical truth deducted from the artist's intuition. Moreover, based on that intuition, we understand that 'individuals are anxious because of a lack of interior' but also, 'because of a lack of interiority, the anxious mind cannot find a place to hide and thus it reveals itself on the surface, which is the face'. So with permission, I would like to state 'the face-face here-now is the alibi proving that the individuals of the contemporary era lacks interiority', and it is a death mask of the anxious psychology. In other words, the face 'here-now' is the proof that interior 'does not exist', and the face is also where the anxious psychology manifests as a visual significant (as the most vivid signifie). This is why we had to focus on the 'indexicality' in Hein-kuhn Oh's photographs. It is the visible evidence of the invisible.

3. Naked Face of Make-up, Mask of Anxiety

Hein-kuhn Oh had his solo exhibition titled "Cosmetic Girls" at Kukje Gallery in

2008. The exhibition consisted of photos of late teen girls. The girls were cast on the streets near the Dongdaemum shopping district or women's universities where university students and high teen girls gather and hang out. Then the photos were taken in his studio. When compared to his earlier work, shown in the exhibition "Girl's Act" at Imin Museum of Art in 2004, the point of transition is the 'make-up' as the title suggests. The girls are simply girls but the artist has paid particular attention to the girls' act of 'putting on the make-up' in his exhibition in 2008. Sure enough, almost all the girls in his photos put on silky powder on their face, eye liner on their eyes, mascara on their eyelashes, and pink shimmery lip-gloss on their lips. Some girls also wore color contact lenses. So, in a way, they even put on make-up on their eyes. On a few childlike yet to mature faces, the make-up wasn't applied well. It looks as though they have some flour dust on their faces. Some other girls shaved off their natural eye brows and drew in thin crescent like eye brows. As a result, their faces look like sketched drawings. We can easily interpret and conclude the girls in his photos are wearing masks - not their own faces but made faces. But is it so? Of course, their natural faces are the faces which they are biologically born with or they are their faces that have changed gradually over the years either naturally or artificially. Therefore, it wouldn't be wrong to say that the make-up on their faces is a mask. But where does the make-up come from? Where do the eye-pokingly high and sharp, curled-up eyelashes come from? Why the pink on their lips? And where does the long wavy hair that curls softly around their faces come from? Isn't it simply from the very desire within those girls 'wanting to do so and wanting to look so'? Wanting to look purer but also at the same time wanting to look more glamorous, why wouldn't they put on make-up on their faces? If so, we need to redefine our earlier interpretation which was made rather hastily. In other words, the faces with make-up are not the faces hiding behind masks but those are the real faces that reveal their innermost desires. The face with make-up is the real naked face that exposes her hidden desires most truthfully.

However, the artist's observation doesn't stop here. Heon-kuhn Oh reads 'anxiety' on every face with make-up. The artist claims he found 'anxiety' on all those who he took pictures of, not only on the girls but also on a woman on the street, a man at the Gwangju provincial office, an ex-actor on the backstreets of Itaewon, a gay, a female student, a girl and so on. According to the artist, there is an almost invisible delicate layer of 'anxiety like minor fever' on the faces of all the members of Korean society. Such assertion by the artist may sound conventional and subjective to some. That may be because we all repeatedly remind ourselves that 'the life is unstable and my mind is troubled' everyday even if we are not a sociologist or a psychiatrist. Nevertheless, none of us can prove why and how unstable and anxious we are objectively. What the artist is implicating here is after all obvious. His photos speak more clearly than his words. Better yet, they manifest his intention. Despite the fact that these photos belong to a genre, portrait, we cannot detect any individuality in the very subject of the artist's photographs. There should be as many diverse human characters and individualities, which cannot be stereotyped, as the number of models in the photographs. Nonetheless, the people in his photographs demonstrate similar style and have monotonically similar make-up and are present in the ambient

state of colorlessness and scentlessness. They appear to be attached to the surface of the photographic printing papers like 'facades without depth or another side'. The individualities that have disappeared and the non-existent aspects, the ambience which is not present is what Hein-kuhn Oh sees in our society and it is our 'anxiety.'

4. Other's Desire and Hidden meaning

Let's discuss the above with one aspect of Hein-kuhn Oh's photographs. To my eyes, one aspect that emits the most peculiar beauty is the irregular outline where the person's hair and face meet. To be more specific, because of the decisive outline, the faces appear as though they have been cut off from a piece of paper and appear white or extremely fair. Whether the subjects wear heavy or light make-up, the outlines make those faces look like 'masks'. Even if they wear no make-up they still appear mask-like. Try taking one of the cut-out mask-like faces from its body and pasting it onto another person's body. The face, which cannot be fully described with a word such as emotionlessness, doesn't look much different from its original state. The face maybe the most significant representative image of a person, however it does not overpower the rest of the photograph as to appear homogeneous with it. On the contrary, because individuals in numerous photos have faces that are very much alike, even when replaced with another's face, there is a hardly noticeable difference among the photographs.

Earlier, when we stated that the faces with make-up are truly 'naked-faces', it meant the desire of the subjects is symptomatically exposed in the form of make-up. In short, isn't the 'exposure' the main cause of anxiety? A girl may long to conceal her secretive desire but there is no place to hide it, so it is revealed on her face unaffected. Such exposed state of emotion is unstable. Furthermore, an even more serious problem lies in the fact that the desire is not purely her own. The earlier practice of replacing one's face from its body to another was intended to realize such practice makes how imperceptibly small a difference it makes to one's individuality. It signifies how an individual's individuality, which cannot be 'contained and reduced', has become substantial. The way girls put on their make-up starts not from their own disposition but from the desire to look like famous female celebrities. It also begins from a vague and evanescent narcissism which falsely believes the repeated reproduction of the popular cultural trend is her own desire. This desire or narcissism is similar to that of J. Lacan's Desire of the Other. The desire does not derive from its own autonomy, so even if a girl has temporarily realized the desire, because it is not her own, it can never be satisfied. That is why the girl and we are anxious. This is what Hein-kuhn Oh has standardized as the face of people living in contemporary society. This is also the power of the mask now understood as 'anxiety' consistently present on their and our faces. His photographs dismantle our persistent belief that the truthful face lies under the mask and visually demonstrate that there is nothing underneath or on the other side of the masks. Only bare anxiousness lingers on the façade. This is the 'hidden meaning' of Hein-kuhn Oh's photographs of the people.

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