

A skilled young man who works with a camera abandons a lucrative job and finds himself in a city park seeking content for his photography. He photographs a swooning couple, one of which resent his intrusion and demands his film. That evening a series of manual darkroom procedures will reveal evidence of a choreographed murder embedded deep within these pictures, a 'truth' divined from the pointillist turbulence of 35 millimeter grain.

Seung Woo Back's recent projects *Blow Up* (2005-8) and *Utopia* (2008) come from an artist working with a camera operating in an era of post-chemical imaging unimaginable when the above scenario was filmed by Michelangelo Antonioni in London of 1966 for his film BLOW-UP. The darkroom, with its lighting, smells, sounds, and mysterious liquid appearances is now a laptop and pictures the size of gallery walls ooze out of digital printers with several clicks of a mouse. Attending these advances is the understanding that any image that had passed through a camera onto a surface no longer holds, contains, or is a vehicle for anything close to the truth – an attitude central to the lauded American 'Pictures Generation' of the late 70's. Decades earlier the photograph ruled as uncontested proof that an event had occurred. Americans were especially compliant in this belief in having nearly brought the world to nuclear holocaust as the result of 'spy plane' images detecting Soviet missiles in Cuba in 1962; and in the traumatic frame-by-frame examination of the 26.6 seconds of 8mm film which bore witness to another, possibly choreographed murder in 1963, that of the President, John F. Kennedy.

As a graduate student in the U.K., Back photographed 'fictive constructs' of toy soldiers in deserted urban spaces – a twist on the camera's singular ability to miniaturize the world. In exhibiting this series Back observed his audience in a double-take; the content luring the viewer into an elevated space of surface inspection concluding in a judgment call on what is 'real' and what is not. The art boom of the last decade embraced, among other things, the rise of Asian markets and the elevation of the photograph as an art object, thanks in part to the novelty of the manipulated image, what I refer to as the fictive construct. Students of the documentarians Bernd and Hilla Becher, Andreas Gursky in particular, spectacularized the photographic print enhancing it digitally to maximize effect and attracted crowds to populist 'blockbuster' exhibitions like Gursky's MOMA survey in 2001. Their place in the market assured Back's European counterparts would embrace subject matter as any commercial photographer would, be it flowers, teenagers, or natural wonders. In both culture and economics Back had chosen the frothiest nation of the new millennium to study and reside in, and his resulting alienation may have contributed to a reassessment of his own history and his returning to Korea to produce the *Real World* (2004) pictures at 'AinnsWorld' theme park in Bucheon. A misreading of the *Real World* images would be possible given its 'first impression' as optically precise cityscapes ubiquitous in art fairs, biennials, and neoliberal 'festivalist' manifestations. 'AinnsWorld' provides the local tourist with hyper-photogenic international landmarks without the anxiety of travel. In framing his subjects 'incorrectly' Back's images collapsed contrived reality into a paranoid 'tug-of-war' between fact and fantasy.

Back countered photography's mechanical impulse to the 'next' by re-engaging with a body of work authored by him, pictures of the soul-crushing North Korean capital Pyongyang taken in 2001. North Korea is a multiple embodiment of the Orwellian 'Negative Utopia' – a recluse society whose mad elite spiral toward provocations beyond its borders into the 'real' world. Accompanied by a government guide throughout his stay Back's photographs of unsanctioned places, things, and human circumstances were censored on a daily basis leaving him with hundreds of rolls of film that he felt little connection to – until 4 years later. Like the photographer in BLOW-UP, Back's gaze was 'held' by specific pictures now re-examined with a distance of years. This archive transformed itself from failed enterprise to rich source material from which the artist culled fragments that once cropped, enlarged, and separated from their host picture began to tell a different story. Here Back reclaims what was denied him in his visit – the production of intimate studies achieved not by personal encounters but by the movement of a cursor across a screen. In the surveillance scan of his own production he exercises

sensitivity with his selections of 'captured' portraits. Especially compelling are numerous Diane Arbus-like images of performing children, doctors and nurses, gaunt military personnel and one uniformed woman who is lovely – a schoolgirl runs by in the background. Nature makes only rare appearances, a single tree appears sensual once we remember where it was removed from and an architectural detail, a metal bouquet is simply poignant. I frequently return to an image of two women situated in a booth above the world like beatific angels in some lesser heaven. The various functions of the program used to edit the *Blow Up* series allow for a shifting of mood like many cinematographers filming the same incident; in addition to 'environmental' portraiture and still life we may add gritty reportage and 'decisive moment' to the stylistic mix. In political thrillers and 'spy' movies, surveillance has replaced pursuit in the identification, tracking and capture, both physically and pictorially, of wanted individuals. Television programs like '24' or cinema like Paul Greengrass's *Bourne* series feature assemblies of anxious people frantically pounding keyboards and gesturing towards banks of screens which hold sets of ghostly images installed, like Back's *Blow Up* pictures, in a grid upon the wall.

In conducting a forensic investigation upon his own work Back performs an autopsy on images pronounced dead, reviving selected fragments in his laboratory. This morbid interpretation extends itself to Back's recent *Utopia* images featured in a 2009 multiple printed upon newsprint – another 'dying' medium. The North Korean propaganda images of buildings, industry, and scenes of military assault are reinvested with new value, manufacturing hybrid pictures located between painting and mechanical reproduction. Back's reconfigurations of the narrative-free 'brutalist' architecture conjure up impossible grandeur – for the artist has digitally extended balconies into the sky, moved functionless details to central prominence, and expanded upon already bloated office blocks. The bleak official documentation of factories and weird medical facilities are 'colorized' to a nearly satanic level, as was black and white cinema in the 1980's. The fictive constructs that comprise *Utopia* overlay one cosmeticized dream world over another one where irony thankfully exceeds satire. The artist collected much of his original material in Japan where a growing interest in all things North Korean could suggest a dark, kinky attraction to an imprisoned populace of automatons. The scarcity and desire for any new image from above the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel is reflected in language used by North Korea watcher Ki-Dong Lee of the Institute for National Strategy who recently stated that "we have to scrutinize the Rodong Sinmun as if we were looking for nuggets in a gold mine."

In divided nations the fear of invasion contributes to a public suspicion of media. Willie Doherty, an artist based in Derry Northern Ireland (a once divided city with a divided name) has for several decades worked in the gray area between 'them' and 'us'. In Doherty's photography and video of his own community these categories are interchangeable under the clinical eye of surveillance technology so ubiquitous that it contributes to the local population's formation of both outward appearance and public behavior. Border towns, like Derry, are often a reflection of the difference a hundred yards makes in societies separated from each other by wire. Yet, North Korea remains devoid of pictorial history beyond that rare official 'nugget' – perhaps the furtive introduction of the cell phone/camera will alter this. Back's art, like Doherty's, acts in the space where caution is always exercised when it comes to the image. His earlier role of photographer was usurped by a censor. Now with *Utopia* he performs through Photoshop again, a job closer to that of the painter, composing phantasmagoric versions of dubious 'truths'. Back emerges not as a purveyor of social realist kitsch but as a fantasist, abandoning the unadorned factual (Ed Ruscha's epic 2003 paintings of industrial sites come immediately to mind) for the vivid but dysfunctional interiors and architecture of the alternative universe of his own subconscious – the surreal.

The complex reception to American 'Pop' art in 60's Germany by young artists like Gerhard Richter exemplified both the thrill and the cynicism that a painting (or reproduction) of a soup can generated when dangled over the wall. The varied responses from eastern-block artists to developments in the west profoundly influenced all we see today. Like Richter, Seung Woo Back, that skilled young man who works with a camera, confounds our expectations of the historic 'next' and positions himself as an engineer of doubt in the continuous present.