

Atta Kim: Paradoxical Aesthetics of Existence

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"*ON-AIR Project* explores actual faces of existence in abstraction after the disappearance of reality, by contrasting the defining nature of photography, which represents, registers, and records images against the law of nature, i.e., that all that exists will eventually disappear."

- from the artist's notes

New York City is the center of finance, culture, and arts and attracts numerous people not only from the United States but also from all over the world. Just as the well-known joke that half of New Yorkers are artists has it, it is also a city that represents dream, hope, and opportunity for artists. Young, aspiring artists with passions for art continue to move to New York and dream of a professional success. This heavy concentration of artists also means fierce competitions among them, and acknowledgment in the New York art world is thus not an easy thing to accomplish. Atta Kim's 2006 one-person exhibition at the International Center of Photography (ICP) was remarkable for the fact that it was the first solo exhibition of an Asian artist at this respected New York institution specializing in photography, as well as for the widespread critical acclaims it received in the press, including the *New York Times*. It was featured widely in the Korean media as well. Not many know that the Atta Kim's success has been enjoying in recent years is the result of his ongoing self-discipline and ceaseless efforts in the last two decades. While this essay intends to examine the meaning of the artist's present solo exhibition at Rodin Gallery, it also hopes to see his art not only in the present progressive tense but also to look back on the steps he has consistently pursued during the period in his practice.

Atta Kim describes his college years like this: "I was a philosophy

student in the school of engineering." Although he majored in mechanical engineering, he was more interested in literature and philosophy than in his own major. At the same time, through extracurricular activities and associations, he opened his eyes early on to the possibility of using photography to give expression to his intellectual interests. After graduation, he held a regular office job for a while, and it wasn't until the mid-1980s that he was strongly drawn to photography and started wandering all over the country with a camera in his hand. From this point on, Atta Kim encountered and recorded images of various kinds of people, such as victims of atomic bombing, patients in mental asylums, miners, Buddhist monks, and "Living National Treasures." This body of work, although early, enabled the artist to approach numerous kinds of human beings with his unique questions about human existence and interests in identity, and this experience became for him critical material, immaterial foundation for the work to follow. From this period came his *Psychopath* series, which he created by visiting and staying at various asylums, and the *Human Cultural Assets* series, for which he looked all over the country for "intangible" cultural properties, i.e., people who were designated by government as "treasures."

Atta Kim initially began with black-and-white documentary photography but currently makes works that more closely resemble staged photography. This transition took place in the early 1990s, when he made, via *In-der-Welt-sein*, the *Deconstruction* series, inspired by Zen philosophy and writings of Martin Heidegger and the Armenian mystic G. I. Gurdjieff. At this time, he started practicing in both life and art what he termed "image training"—his own

unique method of discipline, in which he converses with and affirms the existence of living and non-living things in nature, including weeds, pebbles, and water streams. This practice made him realize that human existence is excessively alienated from nature, and also that human beings are not free from their own spirits and bodies. This realization developed into a conviction that a true self-discovery is only possible through deconstructing existing anthropocentric concepts and beliefs.

And it is this awareness that produced the scenes in the *Deconstruction* series—completely naked bodies placed against backdrops such as a desolate autumnal field and a wintry beach dotted with abandoned boats. Starkly naked bodies that are flung aside like fragmentary artifacts in an archaeological dig, washed up like flotsams on a beach, or hung like pieces of meat in a butcher shop window—they reveal human beings that are utterly objectified. The human being in the series is no longer a conceptually or ideally completed organism or body but rather no more than a mere thing that is thrown into this world. All that exists in the world—humans and things, sky and earth, ocean, trees, etc.—appear here as aspects of nature.

Atta Kim's fundamental interest in human existence began to unfold in a more ambitious way with his large-scale *The Museum Project*, begun in 1995. While he started using the 8x10-inch large-format camera with the *Human Cultural Assets* series, it was with this later series that he made the transition from black-and-white to color photography. It was also at this time that he came up with the idea of placing various types of human subjects inside trans-

parent acrylic boxes in diverse locations such as deep mountainside, a quiet Buddhist temple, seaside, city at night, and streets. The transparent acrylic boxes designed by the artists are populated by a variety of people he invited—newlywed couple, young men and women, families, senior citizens, a Vietnam War vet and amputee, prostitute, transvestite, monk, etc.—and displayed like objects in display in a museum. The subjects face the camera straight on, crouching, or seated in the lotus position, and many of them shaved their heads and present themselves completely naked. The resulting images are exceedingly intense and at times provocative, leaving strong impressions and long-lasting resonance on viewers.

But the process of this working method was far from easy. Atta Kim does not employ professional models, and it is not easy for everyday people to appear in his photographs without any clothes on and with their heads shaved. The artist, therefore, demands that the participants in his project, who are psychologically repressed, liberate themselves from all thoughts and obsessions. The process of all types of people, all of them anonymous, revealing themselves as is and presenting their bodies without any markers of social class and category works as a symbol of self-discovery and self-liberation. As in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's expression, these models are "opening their selves to the world" in front of the camera. In that light, Atta Kim's *The Museum Project* is his collaboration with his models. And the artist hopes to bring an enlightenment of truths in life in an extremely unfamiliar and provocative way not only for the participating models but also for general audiences who have been too familiarized with social conventions.

Atta Kim strives to deconstruct the fallacious ideas that control and rule our consciousness as the unconscious or collective conscious, and in that way, even religion has become the object of the artist's ideological deconstruction.

Atta Kim's acrylic museum vitrines display all kinds of ideas related to this: for instance, war and ideology, religion and salvation, the sacred and the profane, normalcy and abnormality, instinct, desire, guilt, violence, and hypocrisy. The vitrine here operates as a visually intense apparatus and, at the same time, seems to symbolize a variety of things, such as rigid social customs and rules, institutions, material civilization, ruling ideology, controlled consciousness, alienation, as well as boundaries between inside and outside, the visible and the invisible. The artist exposes the unjust reality, in which people are discriminated against on the basis of religion, race, gender, and class, and by eliminating the frame of convention, tries to capture the moment when the body comes in direct contact with the world—i.e., the moment of true freedom. From an existential point of view, perhaps, the path of our life is defined by endless battles and conflicts and found in rhetorical relationships between self-reflection and reconciliation. And it is reborn in Atta Kim's work—specifically in the *In-der-Welt-sein*, *Deconstruction*, and *The Museum Project* series—as a world of self-negation, deconstruction, and contemplation for actual existence.

Atta Kim came to another turning point in his work after *The Museum Project*, on which he vigorously worked from 1995 until 2002. The series was shown in many cities all over the world and was published as a monograph by *Aperture*, the world-renowned

photography magazine. At this stage, a change of direction seemed like an adventure, especially since, as the ICP curator, Christopher Phillips has observed, *The Museum Project* could endlessly undergo conceptual variations and engage the artist for the rest of his career. He refused to settle in his own formal methodology, however, opting to push on his development with *ON-AIR Project*, the result of which led to the success of his 2006 solo exhibition in New York. Organized by Christopher Phillips at the ICP, the exhibition focused, due to space limitation, on representative works from *ON-AIR Project* since 2002. (Simultaneously, his New York gallery, Yossi Milo Gallery exhibited the artist's *The Museum Project*.)

Around the time Atta Kim embarked on *ON-AIR Project*, he stopped using the transparent acrylic box and started employing superimposed images made through digital editing technology along with long exposures. Although these techniques are far from unique to his work, Atta Kim utilized them to further develop his subject. The technique of layering images—superimposing tens and even hundreds of them—is made possible thanks to digital technology, but it retains the photographic characteristics of recording and also allows the artist to meaningfully recompose the topics he has always been interested in—i.e., human identity and question of existence. Some examples of this series include works like *Mandala*, *Sacheonwangsang*, *The Couples*, *Tibetan*, *100 Countries /100 Men*, and *The Last Supper*.

Photographing numerous people for many years, Atta Kim has personally experienced that all humans and all beings have their own

reasons and values for existence. The reason why he changed his name to "Atta" ("I-Other") is also closely related to his belief that by taking seriously the encounters and relationships between the self and the others, the self and the world, one learns that all that exists in the universe is organically related. *The Last Supper*, a parody of da Vinci's famous painting of the same title, concretely expresses such a consciousness about the self and the others, diversity and difference. The monumental work measuring 140x878cm, it layers 65 images of thirteen figures—Jesus Christ and his twelve disciples—into one. Placed at the center of the image, Jesus is superimposed with images of his followers, and, as the result, Judas Iscariot is inside Jesus, and vice versa. To us, who are used to contrasting reasons and differences between these two biblical figures, the work proposes that we reconsider our understanding of humanity via the roles symbolized by the teacher and his pupils.

100 Countries/100 Men, consisting of superimposed images of 100 men from 100 countries and made over the course of three years, is another representative work by Atta Kim. The layered image appears, at first glance, to be a soft-focused, dissipated portrait. The moment the viewer learns that it is the result of 100 different identities from 100 different nations, s/he begins to imagine the diversity of skin tones and ethnicities. In the course of being layered on top of others, specific characteristics and identities gradually attain ambiguity. As images of individuals from different groups accumulate on top of one another, boundaries collapse and a whole new identity emerges. Atta Kim's series of portraits, such as *Korean*, *Tibetan*, and *Mongolian*, along with *100 Countries/100*

Men, invites viewers to think again about the meanings of the individual, and by extension, of race and nation, as well as ethnicity and identity in this era of globalization.

Through the combined methodology of superimposed image and long exposure, Atta Kim has developed his belief that "all that exists will disappear" into further evolved aesthetic forms. Examples include works that capture a couple having sex for an hour, a two-hour-long soccer match, an auto show, the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), and the urban landscapes of Beijing, Shanghai, and New York exposed for eight hours. All of these works were shot with a 8x10-inch large-format camera, their exposure times were set varying depending on situations and conditions, and their meanings are also diverse depending on the subject and location. The long exposure registers mobile objects clearly, but the more mobile things are, the more they disappear leaving only minimal traces. Because of these characteristics, architectural structures and other fixed objects in the viewfinder remain as they are seen, but pedestrians and fast-moving cars disappear from the picture. In *Soccer Game*, though the players endlessly ran around the field for two hours during the actual match, the ground is empty in the picture except few traces and only with a blurry reminder of the audiences who kept their seats during that time. Taking advantage of such temporalities, Atta Kim started addressing the question of remaining and disappearance, existence and non-existence.

One gains this impression strongly seeing image of the Times Square from his *New York* series, which received great acclaims at his ICP exhibition. New York's Manhattan is everyday crowded

with the city's inhabitants and tourists from all over the world. Over the years, many artists have captured images of particular spots in the city in their paintings and photographs. Moreover, hundreds, or thousands of tourists take pictures of themselves in the Times Square against the dense forest of high-rises, stores, theaters, billboards, and people and colors. Most people take photographs with short exposures. But Atta Kim shot same locations and same scenes in eight-hour-long exposures, making the busy activities and movements disappear. The Manhattan locations are clearly identifiable, but as numerous people and cars disappear into time, reality and abstractness are contrasted, rendering the scenes surrealistic. Atta Kim's long exposures simplify, with clarity, New York's scenery with which we are so familiar.

As in his own words, Atta Kim's photography contrasts the medium's defining nature of representing, registering, and recording images with the natural law of "all that exists ultimately disappears," and by doing so, reveals the realities of existence. And his interest in existence and disappearance, the visible and the invisible evolved into *Monologues of Ice*, which utilizes ice's physical nature of transforming into liquid with a change of temperature. In this series, he made ice sculptures of Mao Zedong, the late supreme politician and leader of China, Marilyn Monroe, an icon of capitalism and popular culture, and Atta, the artist's self-portrait, and captured images of their melting, and then photographed the water they turned in a round container. The ultimate product of *Monologues of Ice* consists of photographs, but the process is closer to a kind of performance. The water from the four-day-long melting of Mao's portrait ended up in 108 glasses and was com-

bined with the water from the other two sculptures, then transferred to 1,000 containers and used to water flowers. Through this image of the solid of ice turning into the liquid, Atta Kim gives form to the ultimate emptiness of human existence, desire, and power, and also symbolically expresses the question of existence and non-existence through suggesting a new revival rather than permanent disappearance.

From his working processes, one understands that Atta Kim's work is more than simple composed or staged photography. Though it is unfortunately not included in this exhibition, his installation *Eight-Hour Monologue* series consists of an image of a model captured in a long exposure and also includes an audio of him/her speaking about his/her life for eight hours. Like this, while he maximizes the medium specificities of the large-format camera he uses, Atta Kim is, at the same time, free from photography's formal framework more than anyone else. He was one of the artists who realized early on that photography is one of the most powerful mediums of expression available today. But he refused to be satisfied with straightforward or documentary photography that is merely faithful to mechanical reproduction or reality and persisted in endlessly developing new mediums and forms. The process of meeting numerous potential subjects and doggedly persuading them is a basic aspect of his working method, and when necessary, he employs even extremely costly stage setups, ice sculptures, and filming. He has also resolutely pursued the challenging task of gaining permission to photograph places like the DMZ, the Great Hall of People in Beijing, the Metropolitan Museum, and the United Nations headquarters in New York.

What is ultimately important for Atta Kim is less photography per se than his drive to express what he hopes to express through photography. He has been interpreting his questions about existence with the photographic medium that represents all that which exists as is. If *The Museum Project* was a search for human self-discovery and the meaning of existence, *ON-AIR Project* was about the paradox of "all that exists ultimately disappears." In that light, Atta Kim's work seems to embody the Buddhist idea of "impermanence of all existence." Perhaps, the work that best articulates this idea is his *India* series, debuting in the present solo exhibition at Rodin Gallery. In one way, this series is an extension of his earlier landscapes of other urban centers like New York and Beijing. If there is an important difference, it can be found in the cultural differences inherent in the city of Mumbai and Delhi. "

Of course, this most recent eight-hour-long-exposure photograph offers something greatly visually pleasurable, but what is more interesting, perhaps, is the series' almost monochrome, abstracted landscapes. As soon as he arrived in India, Atta Kim captured with his camera the expressions of numerous people he encountered on the street, along with landscapes and urbanscapes. All the images he captured pressing the shutter almost 10,000 times per day, in the end, are reborn as one abstract work. Without a didactic text or explanation, the image is not read as a landscape but rather as a highly minimal monochrome abstract painting. This multiple-exposure method was perhaps prefigured in earlier works like *Mandala*, *Sacheonwangsang*, and *100 Countries/100 Men*, made by overlaying, respectively, 15, 30, and 100 images. What makes this formal evolution especially significant, however, is the

fact that the new work was the product of the experience he himself had in India. Ironically, he made an empty abstract painting by utilizing a technique of photography, which is by definition faithful to representation. But there are numerous images and stories (narratives) overlaid here.

Countless stores in markets' alleyways, endless waves of people, bicycles, and cars, people's expressions, temples, all kinds of customs, and complexly entangled urban landscapes all melt into the minimalist abstract space of the *India* series. The more the images of India Atta Kim photographed and collected are superimposed on top of one another, the less they are reminiscent of the original specific images. They disappear as if in an ashen sandstorm. The lucid affirmation of the meaning of existence through disappearance— one may say that this is the very paradoxical aesthetics of existence. Mysteriously, it transcends the world of India's forms and materials and leads us to a spiritual world of non-material and contemplation. His travel projects continue to expand its itinerary from the DMZ in Korea to New York and China, then to India, and also continuously evolve in terms of form and content. Atta Kim's present exhibition at Rodin Gallery is intended to be an opportunity to look back on the artist's international success in New York and also on his core body of works that he has pursued in the last two decades. The exhibition includes main examples from his *ON-AIR Project* (2002-present) that he showed at the ICP, New York and the recent *India* series and *Indala* series. In addition, this presentation includes representative examples from the earlier *Deconstruction* (1991-1995) and *The Museum Project* (1995-2002) series shown as video projections. ■