Still-Picture/Still-Life: Recent Works by Heeseung Chung

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A photograph captures a moment. In that sense, a photograph means 'Moments Preserved' like the title of Irving Penn's first photo collection. However, how do we define a 'moment' as in 'moments preserved'? According to Walter Benjamin, everything in photographs from the early days of photographs held continuity. A phototype back in the initial period had to be exposed to the sunlight for a long time because of the weak exposure action; and that made it possible for a group of ray and continuity of light to be maintained in a photograph. In that respect moments captured in photographs from the early days are 'moments holding continuity'. Moments and repetitiveness as well as one-off thing and continuity were closely interlaced in photographs from that period to use the words of Benjamin. But exposure time gradually became shorter in company with advanced technique, and photographs catching/ preserving literally realistic moment grew into a general trend as soon as repetitiveness and continuity were ruled out.

Still picture is a suitable name for a photograph capturing a realistic moment because 'moment' in a photograph that catches a realistic moment is a 'still moment' rather than a 'short moment'. Empty landscapes in photographs capturing still moments taken by photographers display hollow landscapes instead of landscapes preserving a flavor that leave a chance for us to comment on the beauty of blank. It describes a 'moment without a mood' rather than a 'lonely' moment to use the words of Benjamin on the empty landscapes of Eugene Atget.

Professional photographers preoccupied with 'things without any mood' would probably treat their objects callously like surgeons keeping their distance from them. A face is simply a face to a photographer- a realistic face without an expression or a feeling to him when he uses it as an object. A face appeared in *Portrait* of Thomas Ruff is an example. And also an urban landscape is merely a landscape to him. It is not the one encompassing sorrow and desire of living of urbanites. That realistic landscape is Thomas Struth's urban landscape. Photographers today simply capture moments, landscapes, and faces callously and dryly just like this. This is a general trend of photography of our time. This could be called deadpan esthetics to use somebody's words. The photographic works of Heeseung Chung lie in the whole flow of photography of our time viewed at this angle. The artist's works are also callous and dry as in those of Ruff and Struth. However, Chung's photographs are cold and dry and yet somewhat different from the works of Ruff or Struth because she displays certain expressions in her works unlike Ruff and Struth.

An object is an important thing for an artist who is in the line of deadpan esthetics. The main object for Ruff was 'face' and the one for Struth was 'street'. Realistically captured

photographs of faces taken by Ruff could become a facial typology, and in Struth's case callously captured photographs of streets could become an urban typology. What is the main object for Chung's photographic works then? It is a 'flavor'. What is a flavor? One could define it a certain emotion/ expression. For example, Heeseung captures tragic moods and sad emotions/ expressions realistically; and she does it callously and dryly and intervenes as little as possible. The artist only attempts to catch feelings and moods excluding any story or a special condition that worked as triggers for creating those emotions. The sad look of the character from the *Persona* series is an example. But there is no clue for viewers to realize that what caused the sadness as they are facing the character. Chung is not interested in providing the reason or the cause of the sadness. Viewers end up facing 'sadness' itself or a 'tragic mood' itself without any unnecessary emotion. The series of *Persona* could be called a typology of a 'tragic mood' for that matter.

Heeseung also manipulates comic moods in her works. Image work *Folly* falls into that category. An actor is acting on 'laughter' in this project. The actor is expressionless at first, and while responding to the camera flashes he gradually begins to laugh. Viewers have no clue on why the actor is laughing, of course. And having no clue leads us into a perplexity. A perplexed feeling reaches its peak when the laughter comes to a climax with the actor's face is all covered with tears and snot, and viewers could not tell if it is acting or a reality. It is something to be called a strange laughter or, otherwise called a 'pure laughter'. It is a realistic laughter, or it is the laughter itself. Another interesting aspect about this project is that 'absence of expression' is used as a flavor along with the laughter and a comic mood. *Folly* begins with an expressionless face, and it also ends with an expressionless face. There is a certain flavor attached to the blank face of the latter compared to the former. It seems that the first and the last of the expressionless faces are the same and yet different. Could one call it a typology of expressionless face?

But there is a dilemma to a project dealing with a tragic mood, a comic flavor, and an expressionless feeling. Viewers including the artist already get to see the faces in the photographs before they recognize sadness or laughter. And the faces have facial expressions unlike the ones from Ruff's portrait works. In fact, people are seeing 'someone's laughing face' rather than a 'pure laughter' here. A person who sees the face in the photograph as 'someone's laughing face' would intend to find that where the laughter is derived from, and would try to turn the laughter into a 'reasonable' one. This is one way to manage the perplexed feeling caused by a 'pure laughter'. The best way is to pay attention to the moment of crossing of the actor's acting face and the character's face. Some could say that it is the moment that personas different from one another coexist (Bo- Seul Shin), and the others could say that it is the moment that viewers get to see the nondeterministic being (Soo-Mi Kang). But commenting on somebody's face is not what Chung tries to accomplish with her works (at least from my point of view). Most

of all, moods, feelings, and expressions are lost out to be secondary elements for this kind of project.

How does the artist react to this situation? Heeseung's another series of works *Reading* could be an answer to that question. The project is about actors understanding and creating their parts with reading the scripts repeatedly. An actor gradually comes to understand and personalize the part going through the repetitive reading processes. The reading process has an influence on an actor's face, body movements, and posture. The artist selects one out of many takes and presents it in front of viewers. Therefore, the project is basically on the same track as *Persona* and *Folly*. What makes *Reading* differentiate from other works is that the artist undermines a significance of a face (an expression) while emphasizes gestures of an actor in it. It could be an alternative to underline a flavor more than a face.

There is an important issue that I have not mentioned yet. I have approached Heeseung's works as still pictures, that is, still photos. This is to understand the artist as one who inherits creative thoughts of Thomas Ruff or Thomas Struth. But the artists work base on so-called deadpan esthetics refuse to hold moods, feelings, or expressions for their works in the first place. On the other hand, those elements have been included to Chung's matter of interest. How do we understand her intention? Probably it could be helpful to return to Benjamin. Converting a 'solitary' object into the one 'without a mood' (Eugene Atget) in Benjamin's works was basically the result of technological advance in photography. Technological advance that reduced length of exposure time eliminated repetitiveness and continuity that were entangled with moments and one- time effect; and it made it possible for Atget to display an empty landscape that has 'no mood' in his photographs. You could argue that characteristics of Benjamin's early photographs are heading to the opposite direction in Heeseung's works. That is, repetitiveness and continuity that were removed from photographs are unavoidably approved in her works as the artist granted 'moods, emotions, and expressions' to be subjects of studies for her projects. Or it could be said that she was actually interested in continuity and repetitiveness from the beginning and that naturally led her to be involved with matters of moods, emotions, and expressions.

From this point of view, it is quite interesting to find 'moments' expanding in Heeseung's work. The expanded moments grow into extended connection where 'stopped moments' stretch to 'continuous moments'. These characteristics are already shown in the series of *Persona*, a book of photographic works in which the artist pasted an actor's two different looks or put a number of different expressions consecutively together. Chung's idea of showing current of time directly is clearer in her image work, *Folly*. *Ghost*, the artist's another project of series, is also an example of this. A model in front of the camera in this

work is to be less conscious of the camera as a shooting time is prolonged and gets lost in his inner side (thoughts). The model's face is to display very complex look right at the moment of getting lost in conception. He is physically here and also is psychologically there. Or he is here and there at the same time. Heeseung captures this subtle coexistence/ succession of the concept of here/ there in *Ghost*. Intervention of time on continuity and durability becomes indivisibly entangled with moods, emotions, and expressions. In this respect it seems that she pursues the return to those photographs from early days that Benjamin mentioned with her general photographic works. But the artist acknowledges that she cannot retrogress to 'immaturity' of photographs when her works have already reached 'maturity'. One cannot go back to the immature childhood although it is greatly missed (refer to the artist's interview in this catalogue). It is the reason why the artist lingers on the legacy of Atget and Sander who are defined in Benjamin's way as well as Bernd and Hilla Becher as his successors along with Ruff even though she admires the works of Nadar.

Heeseung Chung's style is not the same as the ones of Ruff and Struth even though similar quality is found in her works. She also keeps callous and cold distance as Ruff and Struth did, but does not turn away from moods, emotions, and expressions that are inseparably related to successions of time. Therefore we need to pay attention to *Still-Life*, which is a series of works that the artist is currently buried herself in. The project is to signify contradiction with its title itself that consists of words, still and life. Chung is able to break away from fundamental misunderstanding caused by faces (expressions) by eliminating them in this. She excludes faces of people and observes objects lied in the current of time. Day light is a critical element here. Responding to lighting conditions of sunlight that changes minute by minute and observing objects completely preoccupied are part of the working method of studying continuity (and moods related to it) while maintaining callousness. There is a beautiful still- life picture in front us; and everything in it is coordinated in strained relations. The reflecting panel hung in the air is harmonized with light and round matrix creates atmosphere that is dynamic and yet static and also cold and yet warm in accordance with an icy wall. For that matter, I would define Chung's recent project a conversion from a still picture into a still life. It is a significant fruition of her working progress after *Persona* brought about. It of course has to be under the condition of maintaining tense relationship of heterogeneous coexistence. It feels right to quote Adorno's remarks on this.

"Words from a catch phrase saying relax and take it easy are something that would come out of a nurse and they are not about exuberance. Male and female can become one as an ideology of happiness because it is opposite of a loosened condition, in other words, it is blessed tension." (Theodor Adorno, Minima Moralia)