

Persona 2007

Hee Seung Chung

Photographic portraiture, on a fundamental level, implies the issue on how to portray the inner self of an individual through the camera. As this invisible and constantly changing self, cannot be bound to the temporality of photographic representation, the human face in the photograph is always regarded as both familiar and strange. This series of images, entitled *Persona*, was inspired by my interest in this intrinsic issue within the genre of photographic portraiture.

The word *persona*, originates from the mask worn by actors in ancient Greek theatre. When used in psychology, 'persona' is the outward public image that every individual displays to others. It is a constructed self that may change in different social situations and contexts. Therefore, *persona* is a psychologically inherent apparatus within all of us that adapts to various social situations. The actors particularly intrigued me, as they seem able to develop this covert and complex psychological device in a dramatic manner through their profession.

Within this body of work, I have produced a series of portraits of actors playing their characters. My interest was focused on the relationship with the staged and authentic emotion, as displayed by actors. By photographing actors' facial expressions at the moment of absorption into a character's emotional state, I have examined the psychological process with which actors' *persona* becomes their own temporary reality. During the performance, actors often reveal their innermost feelings and emotions, which they project onto the character to reach a level of psychological realism. At this moment, they paradoxically expose their disguise, their naked or vulnerable self simultaneously and the boundary between the actor's mask and their face; and the acted emotion and the actor's own feelings becomes obscured.

This project also explores the issue of observing the grief of others in the photograph. We are accustomed to watching actors convey emotional extremes on television or in films. However, scrutinizing blood-shot eyes after someone has cried or watching the contorted face of someone fighting back tears cannot normally be done in our daily lives, without being perceived as rude. Photographs of someone's face in grief thus satisfy our voyeuristic desire by allowing us to study the face and all its imperfections for as long as we want. However, at the same time this act raises a question that is not easily answered. What does it really mean to look at the grief of another person in a photograph?

We know it is a mere fabrication; nevertheless, the expression of grief certainly generates a psychological exchange between the actor, the *persona* and the beholder. They have a special quality as they break down our own emotional barriers. It is as if they bring about our own inherent feelings of grief and sorrow, which we conceal in everyday life or we project our own emotion or experience onto these melan-

cholic faces. In either case, at this particular moment, empathy operates within us, tying us strongly to them through an emotional chain.

This project thus encapsulates this in-between and vulnerable moment in which the actor's genuine sadness and staged grief are intermingled with each other. Through the investigation encompassing the relationship between the mask and the face within photographic portraiture, which is often ironic and hard to elucidate, I want to raise the fundamental issue of the nature of photographic portraiture: how can photography represent ones' feelings or the inner truth of the subject and how it is realized within the interplay between the camera, the sitter and the viewer? In this way, I want this project to invite the viewers to re-examine the way we perceive and understand the subject through the photographic image.