

(Un)reality of the visible world

Pyong Jong Park

In *Real World I*, *Real World II*, *Utopia* and *Blow Up* series, Seung Woo Back's works reveal unrealistic images that are ingeniously hidden in a corner of reality. This kind of work is not especially new and it is also a classical theme that has been addressed numerously. Yet, because there has never been an answer to satisfy this significant question, it is still a significant question and one cannot stop searching for an obvious answer. Then what on earth is "reality"?

Seung Woo Back does not have a bilateral attitude in approaching the classic issue of reality and unreality, actuality and imagination or fiction. To him, these two sides are entangled and the difference between the two is rather slight. To further the argument, reality and unreality can overlap each other at times. Sometimes reality can seem unrealistic and conversely, unreality can give the impression of reality. This kind of logic (that sounds like wordplay) directly reflects Back's work. If reality is everything laid out before our eyes, then in effect, everything is real and there is nothing unreal. Unreal does not exist and what does not exist cannot be real. All things, everything - is real and therefore unreal cannot be found anywhere. There is nothing excluded from "everything". Nevertheless, how do we become dazzled by the unreal? By something that does not exist? What are the origins of unreality's fake power to abate the actual strength of realism? These questions represent the core of Seung Woo Back's critical mind. To pre-enlighten this idea, the issues explored by Back do not stem from a confusion of the mind or a folly of the eye. Back is not interested in optical illusions or a precarious cognition of the mind. Rather, the deceptive strategy of the unreal lies in reality itself with its inherent incompleteness and imperfectness. Seung Woo Back aims to consistently explore this issue and reveal this focal point.

Intended Reality and Actuality

Fabricated appearance in *Real World I* is portrayed simply and plainly. Photographs taken in Aiins World in Bucheon are of cultural heritage sites and famous buildings from all over the world reproduced in the form of miniatures. These photographs survey the overlap between reality and fiction. Aiins World is a place where famous buildings and sites can be experienced without being in the actual physical location. People who visit Aiins World experience being in actual sites by taking commemorative photographs in front of these reduced realities. It is analogous to a fake experience but it does not mean that the visitors do not feel satisfied here. Instead, they experience a different kind of satisfaction; a different satisfaction from visiting the real site in its original location. This satisfaction comes from the distinction or more precisely, the satisfaction comes from recognizing the distinction. It is comparable to satisfaction that comes from imitation. If there is no difference between the

imitator and the original subject then there is no satisfaction.

For example, a vocal mimicry can only happen when one subject imitates another dissimilar subject. An imitation of a cat's meow by a human gives satisfaction but not the cat's meow itself. It is a fact that there are different roles played by the real being and its imitator. After all, model buildings cannot replace the function of the real buildings. Roles played by buildings like the Arc de Triomphe, the Pyramids, and the Leaning of the Pisa in their real location are not equal to the role played by the miniatures at Aiins World. On one hand, the exact function of the fakes is based on being not real. If the miniatures try to become real and if they should ever achieve that goal then they lose their genuine value. These fakes carry on their shoulders the strange burden of bearing resemblance to the real but not being the same as the real. They aim to be close as possible to reality but they have a contradictory duty to never attain that sameness. Thus they have an impossible duty to be not real. However, is it possible for something that is not real to exist? This creates a contravening circumstance where fake models have to exist when they are not real and for them to be real but to act as unreal subjects. They assume being real in order to be placed in reality. In effect, *Real World* constructs a complex situation.

Two Turtle Ships and other sailing ships float on the calm surface of water in the foreground and the World Trade Center buildings (which no longer exist) stand tall in front of an apartment complex with the clear logo inscribed "*Dong Yang Express, Engineering & Construction*". In contrast to the artificial and awkward ship vessels that clearly appear to be toy models, magnificent [World Trade Center] buildings form a complete harmony with the overpass and apartment buildings in the background. This creates the appearance of World Trade Center buildings and the apartment buildings in real location in Korea to exist together in the same space. Although this strange combination should augment unfamiliarity, majesticism of the fake [World Trade Center] buildings dampens the suspicion of their unreality more than the real apartments in the back. Having basic knowledge, including the geographic location of the buildings, apartment blocks and the vessels - confuses the viewer upon confronting this strange reality laid out before their eyes. Still, it does not result in an abolishment of reality because of the inherent high intensity of actuality. The problem does not relate to a clear boundary separating fact and fiction but it relates to the wide spectrum occupying the grey area of what "seems likely" and what "ought to be unlikely".

The intent of the artist in other works is to lessen the intensity of reality in order to clearly reveal that the situation is fabricated; that it is a fake reality. This intent is easily identifiable in the *Real World* series. For example, Arc de Triomphe, the Pyramid, Inca ruins, the Colosseum, and the Eiffel Tower are photographed so that the artificial spaces in which the models are situated are easy to recognize. One image contains an enormous artificial wall which cut into the pine tree trunk that stands tall behind the print wall of the Arc de Triomphe with its seemingly real printed background image. Another image shows both the Pyramid and a massive overpass in the background. The Colosseum is shown together with its designated photo spot in the park that is marked with a blue and white footprint sticker.

In addition, the obelisk and the White House are composed in the foreground in combination with the apartment blocks in the back to strategically reveal the unmistakable fabricated reality [of the miniatures].

The works reveal artist's strong interest in exposing the fakeness of the real rather than in depicting fake models as reality; to depict fiction as reality. In reverse, visitors in Aiins World are captivated by the realism of these models as if they cannot be distinguished from the originals. They also take photographs accordingly, making the fakes appear real. However, the artist believes that this action implies a fraudulent recognition of the subjects, deceived by an illusion. This is the reason why Seung Woo Back chooses to photograph the models that imitate the real in their actuality. Back wants to identify the fictional side of the subjects instead. Nonetheless, these models also have their own peculiar reality. Just as an act of barbarity as a staged performance is not actually barbaric, the difference in the act of reproduction creates a theatrical effect and a sense of realism. Likewise, the miniature buildings secure their reality because they are different to the real. Actuality of simulacra originates in this difference. Two types of actuality that enters the scene here help in attributing the seemingly fake side also become real. To clarify, actuality of the subjects that seemed to have hidden behind a mask of a fake exterior is not false. It is the innocent real that hides nothing except for its outward appearance; this is the reality of the miniature models.

Trap of the Gaze

The examination of the relationship between fiction and actuality of models continue in *Real World II* series. Here, the strategy of maximizing the gap between fiction and actuality by closing the middle spectrum is also applied. Toy soldiers are photographed in battle formation, carefully and precisely arranged by their nationality, rank and duties. This results in questioning the assumed fake status of the artist in which he has forced his way into the space of reality.

The real space is enormous in contrast to the diminutive size the toy soldiers and the limited space that contains them. Lawn of a typical London residence is like a vast battle ground for the dwarf soldiers; even a low fence appears to be a gigantic wall that the soldiers cannot climb over. Realism of the space in which the war game expands before them is impeccable. With the exception of the soldiers, the level of reality is very high - in fact - the space is actually a reality. So what is the identity of these strange and unfamiliar fakes that have unexpectedly infiltrated reality? What gives these fake soldiers the power to destroy intense reality?

The power probably comes from contradistinction of the two sides, which is the result of a widened gap between real and fake. For example, an alley lit by a streetlight, a phone booth, concrete fence and green lawn are real spaces; they are familiar and therefore do not draw attention to themselves even though they fill up most of the photograph. These spaces

represent common reality. On the other hand, the small soldiers who lurk about unnaturally in a small part of the image grab our attention because they are unfamiliar. In a corner of the image, they take on human forms and tip toe about like insects. Their peculiar shapes mysteriously disturb the calmness and order that prevailed in the familiar space of reality. Without a thorough examination, it is even difficult to identify their existence but nevertheless they allure us and our eyes are drawn to them. It is difficult to free oneself from the trap of the gaze laid out by the fake soldiers. Once caught in the trap, we begin inspecting their actions and motions; to look meticulously at their features and we try to determine their identity. Why they are in these deserted places and what they are doing. In trying to understand why they are prowling the streets at night in this group formation, the process of speculation begins to gradually firm an unshakable doubt on their actuality. It is their presence that strangely twists the reality of the night scene that is seemingly so real.

Recovered World

The question of reality and unreality that began in *Real World I* and *II* series takes a turn in the *Blow Up* series to explore the relationship between the visible and the invisible. That is to say, he presents issues related to the conventional idea that something that can be seen is reality. During the artist's visit to North Korea, he was disappointed in the photographs he took because they were confined to a consistent and identical vision. The outward appearance of North Korea is only shown in a way that they wish to be shown. The North Korean government strictly control and limit the angle of the camera, the location where the camera can be placed as well as the subject being photographed. Hence, it is impossible to photograph freely according to an individual's point of view. Furthermore, strict censorship led to a film inspection in which majority of the film was taken away in the process of film development, leaving Back with missing frames. The artist felt disgust at the stereotypical monotony of the photos. Even though the artist himself had taken the photos, he concluded they were useless. However, there were images hidden and tucked away in these photographs that were visible to nobody else. It was enlarged prints; otherwise known as "blown up" prints were what allowed Back to see these hidden images. This classic concept and method grants visibility in this intangible world through magnification or enlarged view of the subject. The concept also forms the backbone in the films *Blow Up* and *Blade Runner*, directed by Michelangelo Antonioni and Ridley Scott, respectively. "Blow up" asserts the idea that anything that exists must be visible (there is nothing that is invisible) and what cannot be seen is simply due to the physical limitation of the eye.

In actuality, Back "blows up" the subjects that had been confined to a corner of the film, the subjects that once lost its visibility in hiding. By giving them back its visibility, the conventional view of North Korea is reversed; it recovers its lost colors. These recovered images are the original appearances of North Korea in actual circumstances. According to Back, photographs of North Korea we have seen thus far are fake or fictional. The reason is two-fold: first, the viewer could not see clearly with their eyes and second, because we only saw the side of North Korea that North Koreans wanted to show. The reality of North Korea

- captured in the mechanical vision of the camera and had been previously sequestered in a corner of the film is now revealed by a "blow up".

The image of the two children singing and playing the keyboard (*BL-005*) shows the distinct brand label: "YAMAHA", on the front of the keyboard. Under the North Korean regulation that strictly avoids the exposure of English language, this photograph should have caught the attention of the inspector during the film check. However, because this detail had been "holding its breath" in a corner of the film, it was able to survive and later "quietly whisper" the reality of the society. The photographs also bear witness to strange two sides of the society in which he has captured the lady who jogs at the same time and at the same place everyday together with the observing superintendent (*BL-011*). As one can see in *BL-017*, the supervisor's profile is exaggerated and in effect, the watchmen have now become the alternative subjects of observation. The outsiders show more interest in not what the North Koreans wished to show but the supervisors who are meant to watch over the outsiders. Those who might be potential watchmen such as the man fitted in a military uniform leisurely crossing the road (*BL-036*), the female attendant of the *Air Koryo* bus (*BL-070*) and the man meandering about the airport customs (*BL-094*) are instead the subjects that have caught the artist's eye. They are interesting because they are not part of the prepared stage to show the outsiders. Everything that the artist had wanted to show in North Korea by explicitly avoiding the compulsory gaze had been confiscated, but the delicate mechanical eye of the camera managed to capture these images that (in the end) are not greatly different from what the artist had wished to find. The images he had looked for was everything outside the range of the controlled and enforced gaze of the North Korean regime. One can assume that neither *BL-028* featuring the portrait of autocrat, former leader Kim Il-sung on a slant nor *BL-051* showing the portrait of the Kim Il-sung father and his son, mottled by reflected light on the glass frame portrays the kind of image North Korea wishes to portray to the outside world. Yet, these kinds of images are strewn all over the city. For example, *BL-098* presents a woman in uniform standing helplessly in a circle drawn in the middle of the road directing traffic. Upon closer inspection, there are only a few pedestrians walking about and the road is completely empty of cars but the traffic police carry on with her duties like a puppet. This is an example of the everyday situation staged for the outsiders, but the artist probably wished to find the daily life that goes behind these staged performances. Lucky surviving images contain these images and they include the supervisors looking away during their intermission (*BL-007*), pedestrians walking in front of a "craftwork store" that appears to be close to being out of business (*BL-042*), citizens passing the streets naturally each leading their daily lives (*BL-044*) and a brightly smiling child with an innocent expression (*BL-108*). In the end, the actual image of North Korea he was forced to see is closer to fiction. It exemplifies a circumstance in which what is seen by the eyes is not reality. On the contrary, what he did not see, or what he was unable to see but was newly revealed to him by "blow up" shows the reality of the North Korean society a little more faithfully. On that note, how are we to accept the paradox of what was once not visible is actually the reality?

The World Flipped Upside Down

As follows, Back now focuses on demolishing the border between what is visible and invisible. He draws on the ideas and assumptions that what one sees might not be reality and what is not visible might be closer to reality – and that these two are not very different from each other. This forms the foundation for the appearance of reality that the works in *Utopia* portray. The images are mobilized by imagination and curiously manipulated. The *Utopia* series consists of photographs of modern buildings in North Korea in consistency with their propaganda to show the progress of the nation. However, as previously mentioned, Back applies delicate changes to the buildings or to the images. Yet one wonders if this changes anything at all.

Back sometimes elongates a corner of a building by stretching it, at times he removes the middle section or he sometimes make a part of a building soar into the sky in order to give variations on otherwise rigid rectangular shapes. Back even constructs new buildings in an avant-garde manner following an architectural imagination if he dislikes the dull shape of a building. He has also applied color over the steam that rises over the factory stack and the interior of a hospital surgery – in a dark orange tint for instance. The sky of the streets lined with dull grey buildings has also been covered in red or yellow. These are the ways in which Back breaks the rules; a strategy used to deliberately twist the visual propaganda enforced in making photographs in North Korea. This method of breaking the rules is the common principle of the works in the *Utopia* series. For example, by coloring the sky in a black and white photo showing ordinary grey buildings and factories or in a grey tone that seems unrealistically dark, the images create a reversion in persuasiveness of the original photos that were meant to enforce the idea: “this photograph is reality”. Thus, the world depicted in the images is essentially “no place”. But still, can we argue that this world represents unreality? When all is said and done, there is no positive proof to show and support the reality of the world inside the photographs even if it persistently claims it is reality.

Difference and Insufficiency

The border that separates real and unreal, fact and fiction is based on the belief of the ability to recognize the two sides. The most universal synonym for this belief is sight. What is laid out before our eyes, what we can check with our eyes – these are what give reality its axiomatic power. Facts difficult to believe and truths that seems unlikely can be easily persuaded of its reality through sight. In reverse, it is difficult to claim reality for things that might even seem highly probable without sight. Thus eyes have an authoritative power but it is not all-inclusive. Seung Woo Back’s question stems from this assumption. Subsequently, the image in front of our eyes is not always the obvious reality. Reality takes the power granted by sight – with its firm intent of actuality and persevering claim of reality. However, sight alone cannot support reality either (and this does not refer to confusion or aberration of the eye). Even identical situations can be interpreted in a number of ways according to each different point of view. That is to say, reality is accepted by different people and

accordingly; reality takes on many different appearances in relation to the person who accepts the reality. Reality necessarily undergoes transformation for each individual in the process of perception. If so, should we argue that reality is not fixed according to the development theory and that reality changes according to the method of perception as well? The artist does not provide us with an answer. Alternatively, Back calmly asserts all that we perceive through our sight is not a complete reality. This is the argument he continuously seeks to verify – including in the series *Blow Up*.

To find the original appearance of reality and to get closer to it, difference and gap of the before and after of an occurrence must be revealed, regardless of the moment of perception. Reality can only be properly acknowledged by keeping a distance from actual reality. The idea is take one step back from reality to allow the true features of reality to reveal itself; this strategy is adapted in *Real World I* and *II* series. Being able to see from a good distance signifies reality in this instance and Back brings together multiple layers of the artificial world that imitates actual world and the actual world itself to clearly distinguish the disparity between the two. As a result, we do not see two separate worlds but we see difference of the two sides. The (un)reality of the world is emphasized by the recognition of this gap. Along a similar argument, this gap fomented by existing actual space and miniature toy soldiers in *Real World II* provide a clearer understanding of (un)reality of the world.

To sum up, reality cannot be said to be complete because it cannot reveal itself without its unreal counterpart. If reality cannot stand its own ground then it is evident that there is something important missing. The difference gives reality its power and reality needs unreality as a pair to prove itself. Conclusively, reality is reflected in unreality and cannot be free of fake realities – signifying its immanent insufficiency. In conclusion, it is only natural that Back's works, grounded in these ideas, equally portray both sides of reality and unreality in its overlapped layers.