# Deferred Judgement = Absent Photographer + Freed Meaning

Keum Hyun HAN

**"An image is only one of the truths drifting in our imaginations and beliefs. The question is, how do we look at that?"[1]**

**Gaps, Differences**



Seung Woo Back's *Utopia* series (2008) was created by digitally manipulating North Korean propaganda images. For this exhibition Back took one of those images, *Utopia - #032*, and divided it into 13 segments to be developed in 13 different countries selected at random, after which he reassembled it.[2] The artist gave the same RGB values and instructions to all 13 developers, including what type of photographic paper to use, stressing that no color adjustments or other changes be made outside the brief. The 13 finished prints, however, all came out differently. In theory they should have turned out the same, since all used the same color data, but from one to the next they differed at least slightly, and some so drastically it is hard to believe the same specifications were given. Color adjustment is a particularly tricky problem for photographers. As this exercise demonstrates, it is no easy task getting the right color every time, even with the same data. Unsurprisingly, many Korean photographers go to the trouble of having their work processed abroad because color work differs so much by country. In Back's case, becoming aware of the differences in color was a first step in his personal exploration of the technical constraints of the medium, and this allowed him to recognize differences wedged here and there in the cracks of society. These differences are either ignored or eliminated in the homogenization process typical of a society that prioritizes functionality and efficiency. In *Utopia* they are recovered visually by the different colors of prints developed in different countries. Just as photographers obsess over color adjustment, most people obsess over adhering to societal norms. Imposing such norms on people, however, does not erase latent differences.

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[1] Sunjung Kim's "Interview with Seung Woo Back" in this book, p.171.

[2] This is the second time the artist has worked with multiple studios in different countries, the first occasion being the production of his *My Life in War* piece, shown in the group exhibition At the Border held at the Daelim Museum in 2009. See Sunjung Kim, "Interview with Seung Woo Back," p.164.

New meaning outside the established order is created by embracing these differences. Meaning that arises from difference does so from something personal or peripheral, meaning that it cannot be simplified or fixed. Much like the way the color data of a photograph cannot completely determine the results of the developing process, subtle differences that arise in real experience are in some sense beyond the control of existing paradigms of knowledge or cultural mores. This is why it is so difficult to recognize the latent differences in society. Back's decision to visualize such difference in the form of photography, therefore, is all the more ingenious. Contemporary photography has emerged as a conceptual medium by challenging our expectations of representation. But it cannot be denied that the first impact of a photograph is visual. The global network involved in the effort to complete the *Utopia* image exposes a myriad of flaws in an existing paradigm of knowledge. The social message conveyed by the image, however, is disguised by the spectacle of the large size photograph. The artist invites the audience to look for differences hidden in the crevices of massive structures by examining the subtle differences in color across the image.

Seung Woo Back majored in photography and has continued to work in that medium exclusively. This contrasts markedly when compared to the eclectic work of his contemporaries. Back is no modernist in pursuit of photographic aestheticism, however. Rather, he enjoys constantly challenging the medium. Each of his series subverts the assumption that there is a certain way to take certain photographs, adding a twist in the images. From straight photography to digital manipulation to snapshots, from images he has taken by himself to those he collects, Back's work draws upon a diverse range of photographic strategies. One of his projects for this exhibition, *Deferred Judgement,* uses an archive of over 50,000 photographs. This kind of work is impossible to do without the ability to see through the medium and possess a firm command of professional knowledge and skill. Seung Woo Back may work solely in photography, but within his medium he is as eclectic as any of his contemporaries.



From *Real World Ⅰ, Ⅱ* (2004-2006, 2006-2008) to *Blow up* (2005-2007) and *Utopia* (2008), the titles of Back's earlier works are self-descriptive, but also evocative of the techniques he used to take them. *Real World Ⅰ* is a series of straight photographs taken in large format that

juxtaposes scale models of famous buildings at a theme park in Bucheon, a satellite city of Seoul, with real apartment buildings under construction. *Blow up* is a set of enlargements of regular snapshots taken by the artist on a visit to North Korea in 2002. *Utopia* is a series of North Korean propaganda images that the artist collected from a small bookstore in Japan and manipulated digitally. The meanings in Back's earlier works are thus fairly evident in the titles themselves. Back's photography combines the real and the imaginary, the true and the false, both record and fantasy, taking a slightly indirect approach to current societal and cultural issues in Korea, which he dramatizes in the spectacle of large format presentation. The problems of identity, culture shock, war and division dealt with in his early work barely scratches the surface of his photography, however. What really interests Back is the photographic irony to be found in devices that frame thought, the way patterns of thought are forced upon us by those devices, and the chain of reaction thereby set off. The works in *Deferred Judgement* are another attempt at untangling the relationship of symbols both within and among images, breaking away from prejudice and premeditated conceptions to free the way for a variety of meanings. In this exhibition Back draws upon a massive collection of images, from family portraits to corporate archives, and reexamines these photographs in their role as record and reconstructed memory. He problematizes the role of photography and encourages the viewer to depart from the constraints imposed upon the mind by the study of universalized knowledge.

**"A photographer is not a creator of images but a collector."[3]**
**Coincidence in Images and the Learned Gaze**

Back's *Archive Project* is a new work composed of photographs the artist took of factory buildings at Maeil Dairy Industry before they were torn down, original prints of old factories he collected doing a residency in New York, and images from the extensive photo archives of Kyungbang Limited (formerly Kyungseong Textiles) from the 1930s to the 1970s. The artist discovers that the photographs from the massive archives bear a similarity to each other despite the differences in subject, time, place, and photographer. This was also true of the North Korea photographs Back took. All of the photographs taken in North Korea around 2002 were similar, no matter who took them, and Seung Woo Back's were no exception. This drove Back to discard his own pictures on the grounds that he had failed to find a way around the constraints imposed upon him as a photographer. Taking pictures of limited subjects at designated places under heavy supervision and censorship did not result in inspiring images. Had the artist not stumbled upon a French photographer's work that captured the same North Korean girl he had photographed, he would have never started his *Blow up* series. It was a strange coincidence, but perhaps not such an unusual one. In 2002 the North Korean government hosted a slew of cultural events that attracted a good number of foreigners interested in the Hermit Kingdom. One visiting journalist joked that the

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[3] From present author's telephone interview with Seung Woo Back.

government's tourist policy seemed to center around forbidding everything a tourist might want to do. Cell phones, telescopes, and binoculars were forbidden, and photography was permitted only under strict controls. It is no surprise, therefore, that a French and a South Korean photographer should take similar pictures. For Back this was a liberating realization; it freed him from the idea that he needed to take his own pictures. Assuming that the individual gaze cannot definitively escape the constraints of society, and that images must be shaped by those constraints, just who takes the photograph was no longer relevant. A watchful power is clearly apparent in the photographs of *Blow up*, which reveal the constraints of Korea's geopolitical situation. That power commands a voyeuristic gaze that assimilates that of the viewer. But a single gaze is not all there is.[4] On the contrary, a plethora of gazes besides the obvious one exist outside the realm of control and watchfulness. They may be sensed peeking from the background or the corners of the original photographs, hidden from the eyes of the North Korean marshals and surveillance cameras. They are brought to light in the enlargements. The subject matter in *Blow up* inevitably casts these gazes in a sociopolitical light.

In Back's *Archive Project* series, however, all sociopolitical elements are removed so as to not influence the viewer's judgment in one way or another. While a photograph pretends to be the truth, and appears to depict reality, inside the image there is a paradox that has nothing to do with objectivity. Because the photographic image seems to depict reality faithfully, the viewer may be easily misled to think there are no symbols or codes to be read within it. Roland Barthes called this process of concealment "naturalization" or "naturalizing the symbol."[5] In other words, the "frankness" of the photograph causes the viewer to equate the subject with the photograph or accept the photograph as proof that a certain event happened. These apparently explicit meanings in the photograph must not be viewed literally, however. In a complex society where we are bombarded by signifiers, it is difficult to determine the place of the signifieds that compose symbols. To further complicate matters, the photograph is an intertextual site that provides fertile ground for cross-reading multiple texts that are each accepted as the norm at certain points in history, culture, and society—so the interpretation of meaning is relative and fluid.[6] This may be seen by the fact that the same photograph may be interpreted differently according to time and place. The meaning of a photographic image is no more fixed than that of language. Creating an exhibition that combines similar images from different periods and places allows even greater room for interpretation. The similarities of the images in *Archive Project* purposely confuse the point at which cultural, social, and historical contexts of the photographs fuse and discourage their textual reading by making it more difficult to interpret the coded messages in a literal way.

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[4] Victor Burgin, "Looking at Photographs," *Thinking Photography* (London: MacMillan, 1982), 148.
[5] Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," *Image-Music-Text,* trans. S. Heath (London: Fontata, 1977), 32-51.
[6] Victor Burgin, "Looking at Photographs," 142-153.
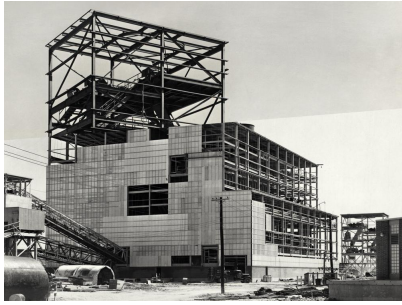
The role of the photographer is even more reduced here. In 2008 Back visited the old Maeil Dairy Industry factory, which struck him as surreal, down to the last garbage bin, and inspired him to photograph the crumbling buildings with artistic zeal. Then, by chance, he came upon a bonanza of corporate archives gathering dust in a warehouse at Kyungbang Limited, where he discovered that historical photographs taken by anonymous workers from the 1930s to the 1970s were strikingly similar to his own work documenting the Maeil Dairy Industry factory. He made a similar discovery going over his collection of prints of factory buildings amassed during his residency in New York. By nature, documentary photography is subject to a fixed set of rules. In the case of a passport photograph, for example, the background must be white, the subject in full-face view. This photograph-as-record is used as a means of control and surveillance by those in power. According to Foucault, from the mid-19th century onwards the photograph has been used as a means of surveillance in almost all social institutions from factories to hospitals, juvenile detention centers, schools, the military, households, the media, government agencies, and scientific centers of research. The photograph adds to the accumulation of knowledge as a tool that observes, describes, reproduces, and records the truth, and it intimately connected to powers of the state authority that control the individual.[7] In Back's collection of images taken at different times and places by the artist or other individuals, the similarities point to similar requirements imposed upon the photographer when recording a specific place. The photographer is essentially absent. The image of the photograph is already determined by the demands of society to produce a certain kind of knowledge and by the gaze of surveillance designed to uphold the status quo. It is no coincidence that the images of Korean textile factories in the 1950s and New York factories at an unknown date should be similar; rather, it is only to be expected considering the manner and conditions under which the images were conceived.

That taking the photographer out of the equation makes no difference to the image is discouraging news to the artist. At the same time it calls into question just what elements make up an image. The question is not whether *Archive Project* dictates what we see; rather, the artist's objective is to shake us out of our passiveness as viewers and judges of images. The marked similarities in the photographs of *Archive Project*, despite differences in time, space, and sociocultural background of their subjects and photographers, undermines their "frankness" and prevents the images from being interpreted in a unilateral way. This

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[7] Jean-Claude Lemagny, André Rouillé, *Histoire de la photographie* (Paris: Larousse, 1998), 87-89.

destabilizes the frame of existing knowledge or a point of view dictated by that knowledge, increasing the ambiguity of the images. Back offers an alternative perspective to that of generally accepted knowledge and homogenized thinking by questioning whether indeed there is only way of looking at a picture. Since the individual cannot interfere with the image demanded by society, by destroying the photograph's "representing in a seamless join" Back suggests that by questioning the medium the viewer might learn to look somewhere inbetween established expectations.[8] These images are presented as a homogenous mass divested of their specific background, place, and time, forcing the viewer to move away from a semiological reading of them. They are intentionally unnatural, with signs of digital manipulation in plain view, as where two photographs have been compounded into one. This intentional disruption of meaning encourages the viewer to withhold casual judgement and look for a wider range of meanings.

**"The story that was and the story that might have been"**
**Certainty Breeds Uncertainty**



The photograph as memento or record is a well-worn trope but not one to be easily dismissed. In *Camera Lucida* Roland Barthes discusses the term "punctum," the instant before any reading of the photograph occurs, when the viewer is pierced by a poignant memory connected to the image.[9] Back's *Memento*, taking its title from Christopher Nolan's 2000 film of the same name, is inspired by the discussion of memory and photographs. Christopher Nolan's *Memento* features a protagonist suffering from anterograde amnesia who is unable to build or hold memories for longer than fifteen minutes. He keeps Polaroid pictures and looks at memos of his memories every fifteen minutes so as to not forget his mission, to revenge the murder of his wife. The story pieces together his memos and photographs, following them back in time to recover his memories, but in the end the constant act of remembering, forgetting, and making mistakes inbetween drives the

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[8] Victor Burgin, "Looking at Photograpy," 135.
[9] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), p.27.

protagonist to destruction. A photograph is not a representation, nor does it signify absence. It shows the traces of something that was there, but those traces are indecisive, not proving anything. The photograph also defeats its purpose of helping us remember things by creating a static image that actually weakens our memories, much like language does. An example would be how we may treasure a photograph of somebody we miss but feel that they look unfamiliar in person. Our memory of the real person has been lost because their photographic image is what we remember. The viewer fails to realize that the photograph thus acquires a life of its own. One fact that photographs and memories do share is that they are composed of themselves, and completely different from representative truth.

A compulsive collector, Back amassed 50,000 photographs while staying in New York in 2009. He acquired once-treasured family portraits at garage sales that had been divested of their original function in time and space. He carefully examined all these anonymous photographs, deducing facts and eventually creating his own stories from them. The practice of taking family portraits spread like wildfire in the States with the popularization of the portable camera in the 1970s. These photographs became a part of life and a means of recording a family's history. The mythical quality of the family portrait lies in its idealization of the happy family. A family portrait hanging in the center of a living room is a symbol of that family's happiness. This is why such portraits have the same mythical significance for viewers who are not part of the picture. Barthes describes his memories of his mother in *Camera Lucida* with images that have nothing to do with her. To the very end she is never actually shown, but readers come away with their own image of her drawn from the other photographs they have seen. Back's *Memento* offers the viewer a similar game to play.

First he selected 2,700 photographs out of his collection and then asked eight people to choose eight each. The eight people chosen at random each create their own story based on their memories and the memories inside the photographic images. The story of what might have been is displayed as what was in the exhibition, which inspires yet more stories as viewers compare the memories presented to their own. Meaning evolves, changes, and reproduces. Nothing is certain, but uncertain stories grow like living organisms. New stories are triggered like a row of dominos when private memories are combined with those of strangers. An individual's memory is continuously renewing thanks to the complex process of cognition, with meaning never fixed. Here the photograph acts as a double-sided mirror that aids memory while confusing reality at the same time. Meaning not based in reality reproduces itself even more realistically than the real thing in the viewer's mind, much in the way copies are made of an original photograph. Nothing is known for sure. The meaning endlessly reproduced here is inexplicable by the conventionally solid, fixed systems of knowledge.

**Drifting Images**
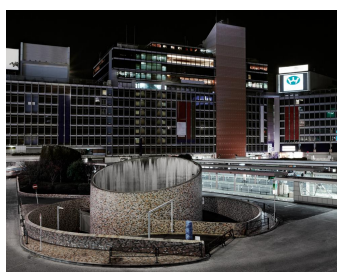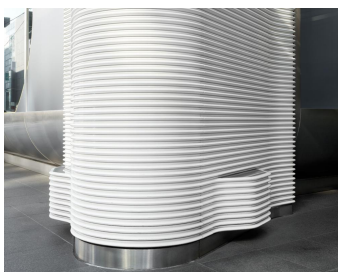
*Seven Days* is composed of twenty-one photographs, with images for three times of the day, every day of the week. The idea actually has nothing to do with time, despite the title. Neither do the images. The title seems instead to be a commentary on the arbitrariness of systems of classification. The relationship of text and image in *Seven Days* is as arbitrary as the relationship of a signifier and signified.[10] The subjects are buildings in Tokyo that symbolize the modernization of Japan. Without any knowledge of the country's history, society, and geography, however, that symbolism is lost upon the viewer. The buildings appear to be merely beautifully photographed objects to be appreciated for their architecture. This is because the artist intentionally took all social and historic symbols out of his pictures after choosing the buildings most symbolic of Tokyo. When an image is viewed, each viewer is making his or her own interpretation based on individual education and experience, which leaves room for error and complicates communication. In *Seven Days* Back has eliminated all devices that might help us interpret the images, leaving only the surface. Thus the meaning is not as clear, and the photograph becomes an entity completely independent of the subject. In the end, the photograph is an image. Victor Burgin called the visual experience of looking at the subject before interpretation the "pro-photographic event."[11] Because the photograph creates an entity that is independent of the subject, be it knowledge or sensation, it is always a new experience for the viewer. Nowadays we are inundated by images. Signifiers and signifieds slosh around at large in this sea of images. In *Seven Days,* where Back eliminates elements that detract from any sensation other than the visual, language, images, text, and the codes and devices used to interpret the photographs have already become too complex to be trustworthy. That being the case, the viewer may as well look at the subject with fresh eyes rather than relying on supplementals to inform any judgement. In other words, Back suggests that we experience photographs rather than read them.

**Experience through the Eyes**

In sum, Seung Woo Back uses the unique visual experience of the photograph to encourage more flexible, open thinking in the viewer. *Archive Project*, *Memento*, and *Seven Days* are works that are not meant to be read so much as experienced in an interactive manner, with the viewer participating in creating meaning. The artist shows how arbitrary and false readings of photographs are based on semiological analysis or external context by

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[10] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique generale*, publie par Charles Bally et Albert Sechehaye (Laussanne/Paris: Payot,1966), pp.100–102.
[11] Victor Burgin, "Looking at Photography," 148.

deliberately tweaking the relationship of code and meaning in his images. Meaning in an image is created naturally and develops organically, but the meanings imposed upon us by learned patterns of thinking are counterproductive to the development of new meaning. Back exploits the photograph's unique relationship with memory and record to full advantage, urging the viewer to participate in the flexible creation of meaning. Today the interest in difference and meaning from difference calls for a move beyond knowledge that is rational, systematic, and generalized to knowledge that is more specific and fluid. In Back's work this move is manifest in the subtle differences he make accessible in familiar, private spaces that affect our daily lives. He nudges us towards the fragmented, the emotional, and the flexible instead of the general, the rational, and the efficient. Back's photography is moving beyond the visual to the experienced.