RS-#002, 150 x 215cm, Digital print, 2012

Seung Woo Back
Gaps, Unrealistic Generals

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Educational background and social status determine personal taste. Therefore, personal taste cannot be free from the social elements that surround an individual. These factors also develop an individual's artistic sensibility, which is dependent upon individual's cultural upbringing. For example, people's half-hearted passion and a general absence of interest stem from the popularization grown out of capitalism. Similar to freedom, personal taste is an expression of human potential and creativity. Social phenomena such as following the latest trend and conforming to social norms, manifestations of materialism brought about by commercialism, are indicative of a state devoid of any true sense of freedom. The characteristics of modern culture, including mass production, popular culture, and populism, force us to overlook differences. According to Theodor W. Adorno, passive satisfaction and lack of interest can be attributed to capitalistic populism. We are constantly brainwashed by films, the press, and mass media, which portray notions of ideal lifestyles. A commercialized culture industry stimulates us to accept specific values and does not allow room for other mindsets or behaviors. Adorno referred to this process of the erasure of variability as standardization. The act of generalization is akin to an unforgiving almighty power against which we cannot resist. Free will is nowhere to be found, and individuals are bound to accept everything in a non-responsive manner. For example, the signs of the materialistic age confront us as an undeniable reality, even if individuals are armed with free will, as well as a rational and critical mindset. Seung Woo Back's latest exhibition poses

questions regarding the feasibility of standardization and commercial generalization that can control individual free will. The essence of Back's work is to visually capture the tiny space of freedom, the gap that just might exist in the midst of generalization.

The exhibition unfolds with 13 fragmented photos. For *Utopia-#032* (2011), Back divided a single image into 13 segments and sent the data for each segment to printing labs in 13 different countries. The final work was implemented by reconstructing the 13 segments printed from 13 different printers. Although at first glance the work appears to constitute a single photograph, a closer look reveals that the 13 segments render variant color sets. In order to be viewed as a single image, the viewer of the photograph must embrace the subtle differences between the 13 printers. Here, the specifications and differences are subdued in the photographic spectacle. Through *Utopia-#032*, Back allows the audience to witness the differences in color sensitivity of the 13 printers, which are bound to surface even in the reference frame of generalization.

Utopia-#032, 220 x 527 cm, Digital Print, 2011

Exhibited alongside the *Utopia #032*, Back's new work, entitled *Re-Establishing Shot* (2012), presents large-scale photographs of urban landscapes, including those of Seoul, Busan, Tokyo etc. Upon closer inspection, we soon realize that the images do not contain a smooth visual continuity. Like the *Utopia #032*, the overall image of *Re-Establishing Shot* contains photo fragments. While the image attracts the audience with photographic spectacles, it does not offer any local traits that hint at the specific city the viewer is looking at. *Re-Establishing Shot* is devoid of the cities' historic and social significances, and individual memory and recollection have been erased. The symbols that would enable viewers to recognize the place represented by the photograph have been intentionally removed by the artist, and what remain are the superficial facets of the image. By generalizing the image, Back attempts to merge these differences and the system within which they coexist. As if presenting an incomprehensible language, the photographic image cannot be read, and the momentary encounter leads only to a floating image. Without the historic and social backdrop, the photograph loses its specificity and becomes generalized. In all likelihood, *Re-Establishing Shot* reveals the image of the generalizing trend in the generalization of popular

culture, in which differences, specifications, distinctions, and tastes are vanishing.

Physical and mechanical differences are prevalent in our daily lives. Yet when such differences are recognized, we tend to view them as faults that undermine the system, rather than accepting the distinguishing characteristics. In analyzing social systems, sociologist Nikals Luhmann has conducted extensive research on the issue of generalization within a system and the ensuing problems with communication. Luhmann categorized systems as mechanical, organic, psychological, or social in an expansion of his research to the functional systems of modern society. It is understood that communication takes place across the society, toppling the barriers between biological systems, economics, politics, and education. In particular, distinctions and differences have become important points of debate in the niche realm of generalization that pervades our society. Moreover, social systems are not created by people, but by the elements operating within the system, and communication emerges as the most significant factor. As modern society diversifies and becomes more sophisticated, however, more traditional categorization becomes murky. For example, an individual rarely holds a single title nowadays. A sociologist might moonlight as an artist, and a scientist can also serve as a religious figure. Amidst such complex and comprehensive social categorization, the approach of defining social aspects according to conventional reference points is losing ground. Furthermore, specifications and differences become starting points for the new order, and are no longer viewed as faults that should be veiled behind a generalization. This is a testament to the fact that differences are the fruits of free will, the most fundamental human desire.

Generalization of Language and Its Innate Contradiction

A language is not a means of referring to a referent, but a concept for building a reference system. For example, the word *apple* does not refer to the actual object; it is a concept that symbolizes the conceptual image of a fruit with a specific shape and taste that exists in our experience. However, a concept recognized by language runs into problems associated with communication. The concept of an apple can be generalized so that all similar fruits are called "apples." Based on its distinctions from other fruits, *apple* can be used as a word for social communication. Linguistic communication, however, entails problems. What is referred to by a word is not an actual object, but something that is supposed to be recognized and known in advance. In other words, we must assume that an apple already exists in our experience. Unfortunately, the memory of an apple cannot be identical for all individuals. It is simply impossible to generalize the specific experiences and memories of every individual. A language is merely a means of communication based on our shared knowledge, and things that extend beyond the system of our knowledge—such as personal sensibility, awareness, and recollection—are not issues of communication. Exhibiting *Blow Up* (2005-2007), which zooms into snap photos taken in North Korea in 2002, and *Explosion* (2010), a reconstruction of various images of explosion gathered from the Internet, side-by-side is Back's visualization of wordplay. The expression *to blow up* can either mean 'to explode' or 'to expand.' Back humorously demonstrates the ambiguity of language and its

inadequacy in facilitating communication through the visual presentation of the two different conceptualizations evoked by one expression. The images of explosion and the expanded images of North Korea all capture dramatic moments. The drastic contrast before and after an explosion and the turbulent moment of the release of energy is captured as a still image and presented as a remarkable spectacle. To enhance the intensity of the image of explosion, the artist adds photographic manipulation in a dramatic fashion. Despite these efforts, the image transcends the moment of enormous impact and fear, transforming it instead into a conceptualized actuality. In turn, the audience no longer experiences the emotion, but rather faces a photographic work that is, in fact, callous to reality.

In some respects, it appears that Seung Woo Back uses images in a linguistic manner. Like languages, visual images are often used as symbols to convey meaning. Photographs, in particular, are the closest representation of symbols used in society because photographs can virtually turn actuality into reality. At the same time, photography is a medium that records events taking place at a particular time and in specific settings. From family photos to face pictures used in IDs, every photograph involves capturing the moment. Even if it is used as a recording medium by the most ruthless power or regime, photography never fails to evoke compassion. This potential for duality in photography constantly collides throughout Back's works. The underlying theme of Back's latest exhibition, entitled *Gaps, Unrealistic Generals*, is the contrast between generalization and specification found in photographic arguments, ranging from recording vs. capturing of the moment and public yet private images, to dispassionate objectivity vs. photographic spectacle. How does a symbolic system operate within a society? How does a system organize and re-create its internal elements? How do specifications become generalized and expire within a system? If the expiration of specifications signifies depriving individuals of free will, is this possible? Armed with these questions, Back visualizes the specifications that are being overlooked behind the grand scheme of generalization.