

## Beautiful Cynicism amidst Diversity

Living in this global, multinational, decentralized world-which, by the way, is often considered the epitome of capitalism-we have lost our fundamental sense of direction and objectivity. One might say that homogeneity and uni-directionality of meta-discourses, as well as the consequential logic inherent in traditional ways of thought have all been cast under suspicion and cynicism. Such postmodern cynicism is not only confined to aesthetics, but has penetrated every aspect of our lives including our fragmentary articulations, common practices of combining heterogeneous elements, and our inclination and desire for the hybrid, prevailing throughout from the culture of media and advertisement to our private lives. Many artists are creating new stages in which to articulate this ironic state, i.e. a world in which webs of significance entangle to form a multi-layered amalgam in which art fuses into life and vice versa.

Such stages are that of an intermediary sort, an in-between space where different kinds of thoughts meet. Here, artists represent scenes of unreasonableness and absurdity, revealing hypocritical structures, and raise questions about the conventionalities which past generations have used without any doubt. Their incessant discussions cover a wide spectrum of topics concerning art and life, which range from aesthetic speculations on sublimity to fundamental definitions of humanism, critiques of hegemonic structures such as the authority granted to the Masters, feminist criticisms on Patriarchy, as well as issues concerning homosexuality.

In the context of contemporary art, artists' "re-presentations" are no more as naive and optimistic as they were in the tradition of realism, especially with the return of the 'real'. Even when they imitate and re-present past things, or adapt and combine realities to create new ones with the purpose of satirizing and parodying them, these artists' intentions lie in problematizing the power relations between the meanings behind those realities. In particular, many works which deal with the human body no longer presume the fundamental union of body and soul nor do they elicit any illusion of purity in either entities, but on the contrary, aim at revealing the fact that they have been reconstituted in the context of history and the respective values and ideological systems therein.

Of the many artists who have presented such works, feminists in particular have criticized the rapid development of capitalism and mass culture as having caused the commercialization of sex and theretofore the manipulation of the female body as an object. Such feminists viewed this phenomenon to be a combination of three factors: i.e. capital, desire, and sexuality. Since the middle of the 1970s, Cindy Sherman has represented various aspects of 'femininity' placed under restriction by society's hegemonic gender structure, and has made an effort to reveal women's trauma. Casting herself as the subject, object as well as director of her own representation, she plays and projects herself into an emptied self who is expected to constantly invent and re-invent herself, all to adhere to the

standards set by society, the self who is, as a result, always sad and unstable. In over four hundred works, Sherman has disguised herself in numerous characters such as B-movie actresses, fashion models, figures in the history of painting, grotesquely amputated bodies, women in their forties who adorn themselves inordinately, even a woman who becomes a clown. Her representations go beyond mere imitation. In fact, she strategically appropriates the 'features' of the stereotyped female images produced by mass culture, and stages the "images you are likely to see somewhere" by utilizing photography, one of the most faithful media for representing reality. To put it another way, her presentations are imaginary reproductions without an actual original. In this way, the artist provokes the viewers to be reminded of the conventional female images engraved in their minds, thereby becoming aware of their cognitive systems having been brainwashed by media. She also suggests visibility itself is a socialized one.

In *Untitled #129* (1983), one of Sherman's <Fashion Series>, we see a female model sitting exhausted with her make-up smeared, absent-minded. Far from the glittering spectacle of the catwalk shows under stage lighting, she appears to be extremely natural, instinctive, and even hysterical. It is the appearance of a model who infallibly becomes just a human being backstage, that is, in the realm outside the gaze. Unlike her previous works which represented stereotypes of femininity, Sherman here focuses more on the other face beyond that fixed, distorted image of women and their insides hidden behind the image, suggesting an approach to women as no longer a mere object of gaze but a human being.

Like Sherman, Anneè Oloffsson also plays the role of both heroine and director of her own works. However, contrary to Sherman who appropriates and represents female stereotypes, Oloffsson evokes the common memories of women on the basis of her own personal experiences. In her *Skinned Series*, a blond faceless woman stands still against a black background in a skintight suit. From the darkness, and from the insides of her skin(suit), somebody's emaciated hands come out and embrace her waist, elbow, and head around. Yet, this embrace does not seem to be of protection or from care; rather, it looks like uneasy pressure that is being placed on the body or some internalized constraint that is as inseparable as the body and skin itself. Her images are both neurotic and beautiful, compulsive as well as sexual, and broad, unreserved and subtle, all at the same time.

Considering that the artist deals with the relationship between her father and herself frequently and primarily, this piece might be understood as a condensed expression of daughters who are physical and psychological possessions of the male-centered patriarchal system symbolized by the father. Nevertheless, to reduce this work to a critical comment on male-centrism remains unsatisfactory, especially in light of its psychological implications. The invisible being behind the black screen could be anything that is confining or suppressive to her in any

way, both mentally and physically father, mother, family, aging(herself in the future), patriarchal society, hypocritical values, and so on. And the image of her back making no response to such pressures causes us to read her internalized dependence to implicitly expect "hold her tight" on the contrary. In other words, the imaginary space she creates in the image allows for an open-ended interpretation of the photographic text depending viewers' personal experiences.

If the above two women artists' fictitious dramas is to be seen as coming from confessions of their internal worlds, Vanessa Beecroft has exhibited a boldness in her nude performances that is unprecedented in art history, a performance of such a large scale as to suggest that of the Broadway musical of the 1930s. As the general director of her works, Beecroft supervised the performances with the intention to expose conventional representations of women in art history, that is, the politics of the female nude which existed as a covert "to-be-looked-at-ness" in the name of legitimate cultivation. She chooses the last places where such nude performances would take place in real life museums, Palazzo Ducale where the G8 summit talks were held, JFK airport and so forth and attempts to resist the authority granted to those places. In this show of abundant nudity all taking place in supremely authoritarian places, Beecroft presents real naked women dressed only in stereotypical female costumes (high heels, bra, wig, and so on) which accentuate female sexuality. These nude models are first displayed as if an army, i.e. acting in accordance with strict concepts and rules which are gradually broken during the long performance of over two hours, until chaos begins. In this process, the objectified bodies return to ordinary human bodies expressing shyness, annoyance, and anguish, moving from nudity to nakedness. In *VB52* held in Castello di Rivoli, Turin, Italy, of 2004, many women of various ages and backgrounds played model. They sat around a long crystal table and gave spontaneous responses to the artificial-looking foods in colors of red, white, green, and others that are served slowly and continuously. Referring to *The Book of Food*, a journal where Beecroft herself wrote down her weight and what she ate from 1983 to 1993 in a paranoid way, this performance is a satirical comment on the pathos of modern women who are waging a constant battle with food until reaching an old age all just to fit their body to socially constituted ideals.

As illustrated in the works of the three artists above, many postmodern artists made efforts to reveal the contradictions and absurdity of what has been accepted as Truth, thereby extending our thought. These artists who are beneficiaries of the expanded range of expressive means established since the postmodern era frequently use the strategy of representing realities as believably as possible only to betray them at the same time. The most appropriate media for this is photography. Postmodern artists have taken advantage of the peculiar belief and

history of the photographic media, i.e. that it can capture and look closely into the real world in the most faithful way.

However, since the post 90's, the post-photographic era, such belief in photographic truth began to lose its grounds. In the virtually digitized world where boundaries between the imaginary and real become increasingly blurred, Thomas Ruff re-creates reality by tenaciously accepting the characteristics of the digital era. He appropriates the use of established photographic genres within their own traditions such as portrait, astronomical, nude photographs, political posters and the like, from which to reveal an unexpected reversal of them. In doing so, Ruff introduces non-art into the realm of art, overthrowing the hierarchy within this specific media which had prevailed for about a hundred and fifty years.

In his *Nudes* series, as in Beecroft's works, Ruff turns his attention to the female nude and its mythical authority which has been incessantly reproduced and established in the history of art and mass culture. However, if one could say that Beecroft re-invented the female figure into the tradition of nude paintings, that is, from the object of male gaze to a human body, Ruff might be said to have attempted an ironic sublimation. He creates the image of high-art nude after appropriating and manipulating the most obscene and vulgar of pictures in its modern version: the pornographic images on the web, anonymous things to look at as sexual stimulation only designed for rapid consumption. Among the countless photographs produced in the lowest of resolution wandering across the virtual world, the artist has depicted images with conventional composition as found in classical nude paintings, and replaced their sexual boldness with gentleness and elegance. This is a comment on mass media and art, achieved by revealing the coexistence of the most vulgar and the most artistic, a criticism about photographic truth, a reconsideration of the concept of purity in any media and the boundaries within art, and even a critique of all kinds of stereotypes of artistic forms.

Gwon Osang's works are also defined by his efforts to suggest a reconsideration of reality via experimentations on the photographic genre and the obscuring of boundaries. As an artist, his purpose has been to remove the foul stench that has accumulated in the field of photography and sculpture with his unique series of photographic sculptures entitled *Deodorant Type*, even though this new thing called "deodorant" cannot be a genuine solution but a trick for a day, for it is used only for changing a bad smell into another one, or odorlessness.

He begins by capturing every corner of the body of a person from every angle as if unearthing all of a person's truth. He then carefully pastes these photographic fragments to corresponding parts of the body building a three-dimensional body structure. The result is a combination of traditional modeling associated with mass and photography, laden with the memory of the

objects, that is, a 'sculpture using photographs as material.' Playing this game of mixing the two different media which have historically been considered the most faithful of media in representing Truth, Gwon betrays both while creating an extremely unfamiliar scene.

The betrayal of reality occurs in many aspects. First of all, the representation of this work might be considered quite dishonest and untruthful, especially in light of the definition of sculpture. All of the three-dimensional parts except for the human body shape itself are marred by the two-dimensionality of photography; they present only pseudo-shadings. Moreover, the photographs as the source of this pseudo-shading have no reference to time or place, i.e. when and where they were taken; more specifically, these pictures are a mere combination of fragments containing countless points of views and passages of time. Accordingly, they are untruthful works, especially when viewed from the vantage point of photographic truth, 'evidence' or 'record'. This is why the viewers feel somewhat deceived for some unknown reason before Gwon's works, even though what they are seeing in front of them is certainly a statement drawn up with photographs.

By adding the sphere of imagination to the insincerity of representations like those discussed above, Gwon transforms everyday subjects into something surrealistic. The flattened body as if pressed down by languor has two different faces, and three goose heads come out suddenly from the human body, giving a literal representation of multiple vision. These strange beings, which could be real only in the imagination, are occupying space, making unfamiliar dialogues. By casting this strange truth, through these indifferent-looking fragmentary pieces in front of us, Gwon provokes us to reconsider truth, dream about diversions of meaning as well as the state of transition itself.

In the works of Lee Dongwook, everydayness is transformed into 'gloomy but lyrical horror'. His miniature human figures which condense both hyper-reality and surrealistic illusion are placed in absurd situations, creating odd but beautiful cacophonies: human sardines packed in a can, an aged man with a recycling symbol tattooed on his buttock, Mozart who survives alone after killing all his companions in *Mozart Chocolate*, a man who is extremely crushed in a syringe that he looks ready to thrust himself "inward" another man any minute with the slightest push, the obese woman pinned like an insect sample barely hanging onto the wall, etc. These grotesque images generate extreme tension, appearing sometimes as hybrids between man and industrial products, sometimes as a distorted figure confined in a small, tightly-closed space, or as absurd beings who struggle for survival to the point of even devouring his own kind.

In *Extinction*, the image of a pregnant mermaid who is put to a gruesome death in a fish bowl provides a striking contrast to the image of mermaids in fairytales who swims serenely with her blonde hair flowing freely; with a swollen belly

and rotting skin, a glimpse of the blanched eye appearing through her black, disheveled hair. We are in a sense getting a preview of a curious funerary ceremony watching the tragic extinction of the imaginary being through her agony and wretchedness being a heterogeneous hybrid between man and fish. Such bizarre astonishment provoked by the likes of Lee's works awakens us to a glimpse of the grotesque future lying ahead of us humans in modern civilization.

If the shock of grotesque surrealism and appalling reality are the key factors defining the works of Lee, those of Naneun might be defined as an arena where all the contradictions collide and flourish at once. His images have mysterious forms where ambiguity and sharp provocations coexist. The facial portrait of a person with a bloody nose is at once eerie and absurdly funny, being both the figure and ground at the same time. Furthermore, the unrecognizable pictorial images creeping out of the frame, climbing the walls, spreading in all directions, blur the boundaries between painting and background.

*"The wind was blowing. It was cold. I dug the snow without thought. Sweat ran down my face, making a harsh sound of its friction against my skin. A woman in green woolen gloves is dragged along to an unknown place. A Christmas tree is disposed of as the season has passed. I wake up in the morning, and then fall into a pit. I look upwards, unavoidably. A lark with a wounded side blows away in the wind. Snow falls. Snow piles up on the ground, all white. Behind my back, clouds were getting dirty with dust, making a harsh sound of its friction against each other."*

The artist wrote the above text with the work entitled *Snowball Fight with Dust*. Its disintegrated and absurd style reminds us of Dadaistic techniques of automatism. However, a close examination of the structure reveals that the words and sounds resemble poetic rhythm, while temporality too returns. The author sometimes refers to real images while completely leaving images at other times. His text might be described as having a curious hybrid structure composed of neither completely disorganized sentences nor narrative ones. Its repetitive meetings and partings and the internal spaces between them extend the realm of imagination itself. The same goes for his drawings and paintings: during repeating encounters and departures, the peculiar forms founded on automatism slide down in an unexplainable way, reminiscent of the Möbius strip, like his multiple identities as a designer, poet, vocalist in an indie band, and a man of many names. Naneun's images which build new intermediate zones wandering between ambiguous identities is quite similar to the artist himself who lives(or acts) the life of multiple identities, enjoying the post-modern age to its fullest.

In the post-modern world where reality and surreality, actuality and imagination,

truth and fraud are interchangeable, Koo Donghee presents a modern drama, the *Tragedy Competition*. She proposes to eleven professional actors to evoke sorrow deeply rooted in their unconsciousness and to cry for as long as they can by imagining tragic situations. It is up to the individual actors to find motivation for crying. They are asked to use every possible reason whether from their own personal experience, from those of others', or from scenes in scripts they read in acting academies. Each contestant exits from the stage the moment he thinks he can no longer cry, acknowledging his defeat. The one who remains to the end becomes the winner.

This real-time based work produced without any predetermined dramatization suggests several important points about acting and real life. The actors find out all kinds of reasons for weeping as if chanting a spell, and control themselves to be absorbed in acting without losing pace or by hearing other performers' lamentations. The contest takes on the character of a situation drama in the sense that the performances are not performed one by one but all at once. One of them repeats "I miss you" over and over again in an exaggerated tone, and another silently sheds tears with a frown. The woman who sinks down on the ground and moans bitterly at the last moment, that is, the winner who reveals on stage 'the self' while 'the constituted self' disappears, still in a state of complete empathy, though she starts from acting, competing with other contestants becomes an absurd text, for she knows no longer what initially made her cry. The audiences outside the screen who watch this whole process come to feel something touching, experiencing some unfamiliar catharsis, though the disconnection of communication prevents them from recognizing the content. The structure of a tragic situation and evoked sorrow that is dramatized and modulated in our lives too lingers between the real and the theatrical, making us confuse whether it is genuine sadness or a mere pretension.

Like the ambiguity between the real and the imagined, truth and drama in Koo's work, all cultural attacks against the established system seem now to be a mere short drama presented only on stage. Radicalism is clothed in docility, while sharp criticisms turn, in a moment, to a passing event. Many critics frequently accuse such an ethos as 'charismatic irresponsibility,' but this artistic cynicism, whether its consequences are tragic or comic, still suggests the social power art has to reveal the human mind, to open up the channels of imagination and to forge new ways of thinking. Should open possibilities and pluralized thought, which can cross boundaries of contradiction and uncertainty, spread into numerous horizons, East and West, new ways of communicating will arise, making us realize how diverse 'structures' can be.

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