Sometimes we forget we're alive …

Interview with Kyungwoo Chun by Susanne Pfeffer

Your photographs could be described as a return to the origins of photography in terms of both technique, meaning your long exposure times of up to several hours, and your choice of portraiture as a genre. How did this come about? What was your inspiration here?

What mattered to me was not so much the technical considerations as the character of the photographs. Unlike other media, photography can visualize the overlay of time. What fascinated me most of all was the expressiveness of portrait photographs exposed over a period of several minutes. The fact that this kind of portrait photography requires the people involved to spend a long time in the same room together invests it with a lot of energy and empathy in my view.

The use of terms such as "clear" and "realistic" in connection with photography not only bores me, but makes me skeptical too.

Whereas in the countries of the West, photography was at first presumed to be devoid of aura, in Korea and Africa, where it was long thought to rob people of their souls, it was credited with a much stronger aura than painting even. To what extent are you influenced by this in your work?

Ever since photography's invention in the nineteenth century, the meaning and aesthetics of the medium have generally been defined from the Western point of view. Derived from the Greek words *photos* (light) and *graphein* (to write), the term photography in the West has generally been understood literally as "drawing with light." In Korea, on the other hand, photography right from the outset was called *Sa-Jin,* a term which from the fourteenth century onwards was reserved for excellent portrait painting. *Sa-Jin* means the "depiction of the truth or soul" and is certainly not confined to the reproduction of material reality. In Korea, therefore, photography means not just realistic depiction, but rather—and above all else—an exchange of souls. I believe that photographing people always involves an exchange of souls up to a point and that this exchange is singular and unique to each photograph. You sense the energy inherent in both space and time and create an image that is both.

Because of your long exposure times, you often end up spending several hours at a time together with your subjects. What happens during this time?

I like to give the person in front of the camera an active and conscious role to play. Because exposure takes so long, we spend a long time relaxing in each other's company. This, of course, has nothing to do with chasing after the perfect moment and the "shooting" that goes on in traditional photography. Pressing the shutter is not the most important moment for me, rather it is just the beginning of a long journey.

I'd like the result of this process to be an overlay of empathy between me and the person in front of the camera—a shared silence or dialogue, depending on how the subject is feeling. After all, the subject is not a 'mere' model, but is just as essential to the process and to the creation of the photograph as I myself am.

So your relationship to the person being portrayed is an important constituent of your portraits?

Yes, because although we're all alone in principle, we keep on entering into new relationships with each other. To be able to create a good photograph, it's essential that there be a relationship of trust between me and the person being portrayed; otherwise we'd have to work with closed hearts. How long we've known each other is irrelevant. The only thing that counts is that we're honest with each other.

I'm not interested in portraying a person's character or quintessential self. A photo will always be just a two-dimensional picture that must not be mistaken for the real thing, even if we've become accustomed to equating the two. That this is a

culturally conditioned fallacy usually becomes clear to us only when we're confronted with a picture of ourselves and are supposed to recognize ourselves in it.

To what extent are you yourself reflected in your photographs?

A photo of a person who's been sitting in front of me for a long time will certainly bear my imprint in a manner of speaking. It's ironic that we recognize our own face only through that of somebody else.

Time also has an important role to play in your video performance, *18 x 1 Minute* (2002–04), in which you ask six, or rather nine people to remain sitting on a chair for eighteen minutes, but leave it up to them to judge when the eighteen minutes are over. Behind the subjects and outside their field of vision is a clock visible only to the audience. Whereas the first participant gets up and leaves after nine minutes, the last one remains seated for sixty-two minutes, although both are firmly convinced that they've timed the eighteen minutes correctly. What made you choose time as the subject of this performance?

For me, my photographic works are always a private, one-off performance. Although I always plan meticulously in advance, once we've started, I let things take their course. I choose performance as a medium whenever the content seems to call for it. All my photographs are invested with time, yet real time seems so crucial in some contexts that I want my audience to be able to experience the process as well. It's very interesting to observe the tension that develops between the audience and participants, who after all are volunteers from the audience, even if the presence of the video camera obviously has an important role to play here. The participants' ambivalence derives from their being not only immortalized, but observed at the same time. I've performed *18 x 1 Minute* (2002–04) at various venues in Germany, Denmark, Korea, and Spain with several hundred people, my focus always being on the individual perception of time within a given group. My work disproves the commonly held assumption that our sense of time is shaped by cultural factors or age and proves that it's actually a purely individual phenomenon.

Do you believe that because television and the Internet are making everything increasingly virtual, we're losing our sense of time as well?

What time and speed really mean has had to be constantly redefined in the course of history. I don't believe that these new means of communication have left us with more time. In the past, people derived their perception of time from nature, whereas these days it's primarily the economic factors to which we've enslaved ourselves that determine our schedules. What we've lost is not so much our sense of time, rather we've lost our sensitivity to the natural world and to natural cycles. Besides, time feels different to different individuals. Thirty minutes will mean something completely different to a man of seventy than to one who's only just turned forty. None of us really knows what time is—it's just there.

In the video performance *A Naming Game* (2004), you have each student in a class of schoolchildren call the name of another student in the class. The performance shows a child in front of the camera calling a name that is not his or her own. It's then the turn of the student called in this way to stand in front of the camera and to call another name, and so on and so forth, until all names of all the children in the class have been called. What this performance and your portrait photographs have in common is the way in which photographs—and I'm talking here about standard snapshots—appear both alien and familiar to us at the same time, in much the same way as does our own name.

We don't choose our name ourselves; instead, it's given to us by others and we simply have to live with it. Calling someone else by name means that one is not this person; it reaffirms that person's existence. When we are called by our names, it's like seeing our own face through someone else's eyes or on a photo. What the act of taking a photograph and that of calling a name have in common is that we invariably identify with others, while at the same time setting ourselves apart from them.

Whereas your portraits are concerned primarily with the relationship between photographer and subject, in *Pseudonym* (2004), it is the relationship between pairs of people that is the main focus of interest. Here, you show a

couple standing opposite each other in the front and rear view pose familiar to us from movie classics, each person's right hand resting on the other's shoulder and their left hands clasped together. What was it about this composition that so fascinated you?

Compared with the series *this appearance: One Hour Portrait* (2001–02), I have only a minor role to play here, and despite being in the same room, I remain at quite a distance from the people I am photographing—at least in spatial terms. The idea is that the person in front of you is a second I—an alter ego, as it were.

As everyone who sees this work will doubtless be reminded of comparable scenes from TV films and movies, it's obvious that what is taking place here is a dialogue, even if only one face is visible. Throughout the relatively long exposure time of around thirty minutes, the participants automatically enter into a state of physical dependence on each other. Their arms become heavy and so have to rely all the more heavily on the other's shoulder for support. The beholder, meanwhile, is free to watch this much like a TV viewer. We all need someone to second us, as I see it, and it follows that my second's mirror is bound to be me myself.

As we all have to address the question of the extent to which we support each other or are a burden to each other in a relationship, this performance was likewise performed with several different pairs of people.

In your performance *INTO (apoyo o carga)* (2005) in San Sebastian, you asked ten people who had never before met to sit facing each other on two benches. What happens when strangers encounter each other in such a way?

In this project, the participants were asked to offer the person sitting opposite them their hand. In other words, they were given a legitimate opportunity to be intimate and have physical contact with a stranger for a limited period of time. Having all been given the same task, they naturally felt bound to each other in some way. The two people holding hands were mutually dependent and could either support or become a burden to each other, depending on how their very brief relationship developed. I staged the situation in such a way that the choice was between becoming a burden to each other, or trusting each other.

We're strangers only for as long as we feel estranged. Even if it's someone you've only just met, you may feel comfortable together or you may remain strangers—although remaining strangers is something that makes us anxious.

One of your most recent works is a video installation called *100 Questions* (2004–05) in which you ask ten people in a Spanish village to think up ten anonymous questions each that can be answered only with yes or no. After writing their one hundred questions on cards, you shuffle the cards and then hold up each question in turn for them to see— but without looking to see which question it is. The people are filmed individually either nodding or shaking their heads in response to the questions held up in front of them, and it is only this movement of the head that is recorded on film, not the question being asked. Although all the questions are shown as subtitles, they are not necessarily shown in the right order and so cannot be allocated to any specific video sequence. Protecting your participants' privacy appears to be something you care about a lot—in your photographs as well.

Yes, that's true. As an artist I feel strongly that my participants shouldn't be used merely as material. After all, you can't just manipulate people whichever way you like. That's why I usually work with people I know personally.

I respect the individuality of the people I portray and quite often, something completely unexpected happens, something that would've been impossible without this particular person.

I often have no concrete idea of what the results of my work will be. Although I prepare every situation with great care, I never really know what's going to happen in advance. My primary concern is therefore to accept whatever comes. I often wonder how best to get around value judgments such as good or bad, because ultimately there is something to be had out of every experience—just as there are all kinds of sounds in silence.

Is that what you meant when you said "I photograph not what I see, but what I believe exists?"

I'm much less interested in the search for motifs, or rather in my visual environment, than I am in the idea of what would be possible. Making the existence of a phenomenon visible may be laborious, but it's always worthwhile. Of course

photography has to do with direct reality, yet it also has to do with the belief that there are many different ways of viewing the same thing. Believing really is seeing.

In *100 Questions* (2004–05), it's easy to tell when someone is telling the truth and when not even without knowing the question. How do you explain this?

That we lie without even being aware of it is only human. My work can also be perceived as a comment on a culture—I mean Western culture—in which we're constantly required to respond with yes or no. When I first came to live in Europe, I frequently found myself being confronted with this question or that and frequently felt under pressure to take a stand. Yet it's terrible always having to know how you feel and what you want.

So it's different in Korea?

Thanks to globalization, I'm afraid the differences between the various cultures are getting smaller all the time. Yet it's still true to say that people in Korea prefer to answer questions in the abstract rather than directly—especially when they've just been asked about their feelings. Of course such a mentality can be a problem here in the West. Yet a lot of things are never explained directly in Korea; that's just the way it is.

You seem to avoid all forms of active intervention in your work. Does this mean you believe in chance?

No, I don't believe in chance—at least not in the absolute sense. Chance to my mind is just another way of saying that we don't fully understand why some things happen and others don't.

I try to make so-called chance an integral part of my performances, especially as it's often an important avenue of interpretation. Yet in my view, chance occurrences are actually more like consequences; participants perceive a situation in an unexpected way and this causes them to react one way rather than another—unconsciously, yes, but never without cause.

It seems to me that what all your works have in common is that the people involved in them engage in contemplation and reflection.

Yes, exactly. If I give my participants a certain amount of freedom, then they have no choice but to reflect. Sometimes we forget we're alive.

Kyungwoo Chun-photographs, video performances, Hatje Cantz 2005