

Shadow and Scale in the KYOPO Project

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[‘Shadow and Scale in the KYOPO Project’, in *CYJO*, *KYOPO*, Umbrage Editions, New York 2011.]



CYJO's The KYOPO Project: A Photographic and Textual Project on Identity and Immigration through the Lens of the Korean Diaspora contains a series of pictures that can be viewed singly or in a variety of grids, configured for particular spaces. Yet ‘grids’ is not quite accurate because it suggests a regular, rectangular network of frames while, when the KYOPO pictures are put together, there is instead the illusion of people standing in rank on a succession of single floors, so that on each

storey, the viewer sees a group portrait. The effect is far from a traditional school or work group photograph, of course, since the figures stand a formal, uniform distance from each other (a little like soldiers at ease on a parade ground), and since each of the subjects has been photographed individually, and only later assembled. That practice has a long history in painted group portraits (in which, given the time each portrait would take, it was impractical to have people sitting together for the painter) and in much photography since Hill and Adamson used the new medium to begin to make a massive group portrait of church dissenters in 1843.



There is one curious feature of the KYOPO groups which may strike the viewer, especially if they bring to mind group photographs: all the subjects are of about the same height. Leaving aside for the moment the issue of subject matter, the pictures fit snugly into a widespread genre in contemporary art photography to work in typological series, to produce pictures in which the artist supplies a uniform frame, allowing variation in the subjects (their clothing, pose, body shape and facial expression) to come to the fore. This type of photography has a relation to anthropological photographs of the imperial past in which the subjects (clearly separated by race or class from the intended viewers) were coerced or induced to be photographed, and where the interest was in classification and measurement of typical specimens. In much typological contemporary art photography, there is no clear separation of the viewer from the subject, and the pictures may encourage the viewer to think about how people present themselves, especially before a lens, means, how awareness of one's self-image may become a trap and how artistic

viewers (and the creator of the photographs) may apparently escape it in moments of higher consciousness.¹



The falsification of scale may give us pause. Once it is seen, other works come to mind, in particular the photographs of obsolescent industrial structures made by Bernd and Hilla Becher, which stand as an origin for so much of this work. The Bechers took enormous care to produce uniform views of their subjects in even light, against flat skies, and without the distraction of human figures, yet since presumably the water towers or pit heads that they depicted were of markedly different sizes, objective recording stopped short at this point. If the interest is really to make a form of knowledge, why should the rights of the image and the frame be favoured above those of scale?

CYJO has been meticulous in ensuring that the background is as uniform as possible. The subjects are shot in the same light, which softly models their clothes and faces, in the same space, and at the same spot on the floor. A close examination of the wood grain in the floor allows the viewer to see the slight magnification and shrinking that makes the subjects appear the same height. So the gathering here, in this bare modern space, is a fabrication, and the subjects' uniformity is also a little manufactured.

¹ I have written about this type of photography in 'What's in a Face? Blankness and Significance in Contemporary Art Photography', *October*, no. 122, Fall 2007, pp. 71-90.



One motive for making such a fiction comes across strongly in video interviews with some of the KYOPO subjects from the US and indeed with CYJO herself.² They say, first, that Korean-Americans are rarely represented as such, that there has been little reflection in photography or writing on the complexities and antinomies of their identity, and also that the Diaspora has been too scattered to produce such thinking. The subjects of *The KYOPO Project* were chosen by a spreading network of people which began with a single Korean-American acquaintance of the artist. It is a record of the slender web of friendships and other links that do exist, by bringing the subjects together in a constructed and particular 'space'. In raising funds for *The KYOPO Project*, CYJO has helped to assemble the community of discourse that has been lacking, bringing large numbers of Korean-Americans together in social settings which encourage collective reflection on identity. The work may be seen as a social process as well as a final photographic result.

The KYOPO seen here are varied in age, profession, culture and in the way they present themselves to the artist and the camera. All seem, however, to be quite secure before the lens and to be comfortably well-off, judging by their clothes and bearing. The effect may be accentuated by the bare white wall and smooth wooden floor of the room in which they are photographed, features of a domesticated modernism that may be found in any affluent pocket

² See 'The Kyopo Project - How to Get Involved': <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0EQMJvgO3Ys&feature=related> and 'Kyopo Project Interview with Cindy Hwang aka CYJO': <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hY24XyacC60> Accessed 16 January 2011.

of the globe. Yet various spectres haunt these clean, bright pictures and some of them emerge from reading the accompanying texts in which the subjects reflect on their attachment to or detachment from Korea and Koreanness.



Some of them, or their families, are economic migrants, others are adopted, others—particularly women—are cultural migrants, fleeing rigid patriarchal expectations. The prevalence of adoptees is striking. US adoption agencies started operating in Korea in the wake of the war, initially trying to place the many Amerasian children abandoned by the departing troops and shunned by their own society. They greatly expanded their operations in subsequent decades, exporting hundreds of thousands of babies (mostly orphans and those born of unmarried women) in barely regulated circumstances. These children—who briefly became commodities—were placed in homes across the US, Belgium, Switzerland, the Netherlands and elsewhere, and often raised in places and with people who had little or no connection to their nation of birth.

The fate of the adopted, who live with the constant shadow of the idea of a different life, a different family, and for many KYOPO, with the awareness of a lost language, point to the wider circumstances of Korea's history, which drove so many abroad. Korea was, of course, subjected to a long and brutal occupation by Japan (which involved forced modernisation and the suppression of Korean culture), the division of the nation into Soviet and US zones at the end of the Second World War, leading to the Korean War and the long-term division of the country. The spectres of the North haunt these pictures by their absence, but the South, it should be

remembered, was subject to long periods of US-backed autocratic and military rule. As in many of the frontline states of the Cold War (think also of Japan, Taiwan and Germany), very rapid industrialisation and modernisation was imposed by the state with little regard for the consequences in social dislocation, environmental damage, and erasures of culture and history. People became wealthier, certainly, in the unequal competition of Western consumer society and indigenous customs, cultures and ways of life.

The bright, studio-lit portraits of *The KYOPO Project* at first seem to make little reference to that history, celebrating rather the clean, well-presented figures of a scattered people, who appear to be good workers and consumers, and who cast almost no shadow on the smooth wooden floor. This is in curious contrast to CYJO's previous photographic project about migrants to Beijing who also flee their place of origin for a better, more economically secure life, and who, as the artist writes, clean, serve food, courier, construct buildings and recycle trash.³ Like *The KYOPO Project*, this series is also meant as a celebration of people whom the artist admires, and she writes of their 'modesty, kindness and courage'.⁴ Yet the Beijing pictures are monochrome, fixed on the subjects' hands (the instruments of their labour), which are seen as grey, slightly modelled shapes against a black background, playing up the variation in their thickness and slenderness, strength, ageing and occasionally deformation. As with the KYOPO, each subject is briefly interviewed: here, about their place of birth, reasons for coming to Beijing, their lives before and after migration, and their opinions about China's present and future. In both cases, the project approaches journalism—the regular combination of portrait and interview. In most journalism, though, a clearer story would emerge from the combination of picture and text, in which each would support the other, making a joint, easily read anecdote. In CYJO's projects, as in much art of this type, the link between text and image is often murky, the two seem disjointed, and viewers are left to reflect on the inadequacies of photography, the deceptiveness of appearances, the paucity of words, and the poverty of social interactions in a marketised world.

The KYOPO, in their clean modern space, are presented flatteringly in conformity with the rules of fashion and contemporary art photography, and the way they present themselves as individuals, the way that they wear their costumes and confront the camera, are played up as constructs. This includes, naturally, any elements of 'Koreanness', which take their place alongside the assemblage of off-the-peg costumes of many kinds of cultural pointer. The pantomime character of these as they appear in this photographic setting (the monk seems no more authentic than the 'sailor') suggests that, despite the relative racial uniformity of the subjects, that they do not appear as 'others' to the cosmopolitan art audience, being as scattered, rootless and diffuse in their cultural attachments as the rest of us. As the novelist Chang-Rae Lee puts it in his text for the artist:

The Korea that I know is the Korea my parents brought over in 1968, which doesn't exist anymore. Their sense of culture, value and self were hermetically sealed and brought with them in boxes.

As with many histories (though with more suddenness and violence than many), the histories of the KYOPO are broken. In the alliances of image and text, the positive quality of the celebration

³ CYJO, 'Epilogue', in *Substructure*, Beijing 2010, n.p.

⁴ Ibid.

of these particular individuals and the fostering of reflection about their shared identity comes into contention with the playing up of shifting and provisional identities that the fashion photo refers to, along with the style of self-revelation (familiar from brief magazine interviews and Facebook) which appears to grant succinct insights into a subjectivity but is just as often a shield, another form of self-conscious self-presentation and promotion in a society in which the boundaries between work and leisure, public and private have eroded. If the manual labourers were represented by their hands, the KYOPO, too, are represented by the tool of their labour in a networked world—their image and the brief words that may be offered on a profile page. The work—blank, bright, seemingly objective—gives few clues about whether we should read it as celebration or lamentation. The isolation of the figures—a registration of KYOPO separateness, and also of a wider condition of the inhabitants of the networked society—is a troubling register of alienation and separation, but can say little in itself the progress or recess of these conditions, or about how people, singly and collectively, struggle with and against them.