NOH Suntag
Ausnahmezustand/
State of Emergency/
비상국가

Herausgegeben von/Edited by
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Württembergischen Kunstverein Stuttgart
und/and
Palau de la Virreina, Barcelona

Texte von/Texts by
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Nathalie Boseul SHIN, Gespräch mit dem Künstler/Conversation with the artist

HATJE
CANTZ

Vorwort / Preface

Hans D. Christ, Iris Dressler

Dieser Katalog entstand im Zusammenhang mit der Einzelausstellung des südkoreanischen Fotografen NOH Suntag im Württembergischen Kunstverein, die im Herbst 2009 noch in der La Virreina in Barcelona zu sehen sein wird. Unter dem Titel »Ausnahmezustand« zeigte sie acht Serien mit insgesamt 196 Fotos, die sich mit der koreanischen Halbinsel sowie mit den durch die Teilung des Landes bedingten Auswirkungen auf das politische wie alltägliche Leben in Südkorea auseinandersetzen.
NOH Suntag bietet einen spezifischen Blick auf Korea an, nähert sich den alltäglichen, sozialen, politischen wie historisch bedingten gesellschaftlichen Brüchen seiner Heimat von der Kehrseite der oberflächlichen Stereotype her. Dabei ist es ihm durchaus bewusst, dass jedem Bild ein Vorurteil inhärent ist, es keine neutralen Bilder gibt. So sind seine Fotoserien gleichermaßen Dokumente konkreter Ereignisse wie stilisierte, scheinbar fiktionale Konstruktionen. Ihre Bildabfolgen sind wie Reportagen gefasst und folgen zugleich asynchronen Narrationen, die, rhythmisiert in Sequenzen, Bildpaare oder zentrale Einzelbilder, Zeiträume von bis zu neun Jahren umspannen. Dennoch sind die Bezüge auf das aktuelle Zeitgeschehen verbindlich und verweisen zurück auf einen Autor, der sich kritisch zu seinem Umfeld positioniert.
NOH Suntag sieht Korea in einer prekären Gesamtverfassung, die er als permanenten Ausnahmezustand, als andauernde Projektion auf eine »Gefahr im Verzug« beschreibt. Der »Fall Korea« spiegelt dabei zugleich den Zustand einer Welt, die sich in festgeschriebenen Polarisierungen – Nord/Süd, arm/reich, Kommunismus/Kapitalismus, Frieden/Krieg, Fundamentalismus/Liberalismus etc. – eingerichtet hat. Sie erlauben es den Machthabern, sich im Dauerzustand der Ausnahme von der Regel zu etablieren und sich somit dauerhaft ihrer selbst verfassten Rechtsordnung zu entledigen.

Der vorliegende Katalog umfasst einen Text – oder besser eine Text-Bild-Montage – von Hans D. Christ, ein ausführliches Interview zwischen Nathalie Boseul SHIN und NOH Suntag, das den Künstler, seine Sicht auf Korea und auf das Medium Fotografie vorstellt, sowie einen Bildteil mit allen in der Ausstellung gezeigten Fotografien, die mit Angaben zu ihren Kontexten und mit Übersetzungen zu den darin erscheinenden koreanischen Texten versehen sind.
Wir möchten uns an dieser Stelle bei allen bedanken, die sowohl die Ausstellung als auch diesen Katalog möglich gemacht haben. Vor allen anderen ist dabei NOH Suntag zu nennen, der uns nicht nur mit seinen außergewöhnlichen Arbeiten bereichert, sondern die Ausstellung in einem intensiven und freundschaftlichen Prozess von der Konzeption bis zur Realisierung begleitet hat. Nathalie Boseul SHIN hat uns als Erste mit dem Werk von NOH Suntag vertraut gemacht. Sie koordinierte das Projekt in Südkorea und war wesentlich an der Konzeption der Ausstellung beteiligt. Der engen Zusammenarbeit mit beiden ist nicht zuletzt die klare Struktur zu verdanken, mit der die Ausstellung sowohl im Hinblick auf die Ausstellungsarchitektur als auch die damit verbundenen räumlich gefassten Narrationen präsentiert wurde. Die bauliche Entwicklung und Umsetzung der Architektur war wiederum einem Team geschuldet, das unter der Leitung von Serge de Waha für seine Präzision überregionale Anerkennung findet. Großer Dank gilt dem gesamten Team des Württembergischen Kunstvereins sowie Katrin Hassler, die das Projekt im Rahmen eines Praktikums mit großem Einsatz mitgetragen hat.
In Korea wurde die Ausstellung wesentlich von NOH Joon Eui, Direktorin des Total Museum, KIM Hyunho von den Vegastudios sowie durch den Arts Council Korea unterstützt. In Deutschland engagierten sich insbesondere die Stiftung Kunstfonds, die Kunststiftung LBBW sowie das Unternehmen ProLab für

das Projekt. Das Programm des Württembergischen Kunstvereins wird zudem regelmäßig von seinen Mitgliedern, dem Kulturamt der Stadt Stuttgart und dem Ministerium für Wissenschaft, Forschung und Kunst des Landes Baden-Württemberg gefördert. Auch sie haben zur Realisierung der Ausstellung und des Kataloges beigetragen. Nicht zuletzt gilt den GrafikerInnen dieser gestalterisch höchst ungewöhnlichen Publikation unser Dank.

This catalogue was conceptualized in the scope of the solo exhibition by South Korean photographer NOH Suntag at the Württembergischer Kunstverein, also to be presented in Barcelona's La Virreina gallery space in the fall of 2009. Under the title *State of Emergency*, eight series with a total of 196 photographs were exhibited exploring the Korean Peninsula, including the impact caused by the country's division on both political and everyday life in South Korea. NOH Suntag reveals a distinctive glimpse of Korea, approaching his homeland's social fissures—originating in everyday, social, political, and historical issues—from an inverse perspective vis-à-vis superficial stereotypes, with a certain awareness of prejudice being inherent in each image, no images neutral. Hence, his photo series both document concrete events and embody stylized, seemingly fictional constructions. The image sequences are composed as reportages and likewise pursue asynchronous narratives—rhythmized in sequences, image pairs, or pivotal individual images—spanning periods of up to nine years. Yet the references to topical current affairs are specific and refer back to an author who asserts a critical position toward his environment.
NOH Suntag perceives Korea as situated in a general state of precariousness, describing it as experiencing a permanent state of emergency, as an enduring projection of a "delayed danger." In this respect, the "case of Korea" simultaneously mirrors the state of a world that has established itself in the midst of codified polarizations—north/south, poor/rich, communism/capitalism, peace/war, fundamentalism/liberalism, et cetera—allowing rulers to establish themselves in permanent exception-to-the-rule conditions, to thus enduringly forsake their self-drafted legal order.

This catalogue includes an essay—or rather a text-image montage—by Hans D. Christ, an elaborate interview between Nathalie Boseul SHIN and NOH Suntag introducing the artist with his outlook

on Korea and on the medium photography, as well as an image section displaying all photographs shown in the exhibition furnished with information about their respective contexts, including translations of Korean text visible in the images.
At this juncture, we would like to thank all parties who have made both the exhibition and this catalogue possible. We extend our gratitude most especially to NOH Suntag, who has not only enriched us with his extraordinary works but has also accompanied the exhibition in an intensive and amicable process unfolding from conception through realization.
Nathalie Boseul SHIN initially brought the work of NOH Suntag to our attention. She coordinated the project in South Korea and was significantly involved in the conceptualization of the exhibition. The intensive collaboration with both significantly contributed to the clear structures framing the presentation of the exhibition, in respect to both the exhibition architecture and the related spatially composed narratives. The structural development and implementation of the architecture is in turn owed to a team, run by Serge de Waha, having received nationwide recognition for their precision. Special thanks are offered to the entire Württembergischer Kunstverein team as well as to Katrin Hassler, whose unyielding dedication helped sustain the project over the course of her internship.
In Korea, the exhibition was strongly supported by NOH Joon-eui, director of the Total Museum, by KIM Hyun-ho of Vega Studio, and by the Arts Council Korea. In Germany, particularly the Stiftung Kunstfonds, the Kunststiftung LBBW, along with the company ProLab demonstrated commitment to the project. Furthermore, the Württembergischer Kunstverein's program is regularly sponsored by its members, by the Arts and Culture Department of the City of Stuttgart, and by the Baden-Württemberg Ministry of Science, Research and the Arts—all of whom have likewise contributed to the realization of this exhibition and catalogue. And not least do we extend our thanks to the graphic designers of this, graphically speaking, highly unusual publication.

NOH Suntag—Photographs Narrated Essay on the Territories, Images, and Mirror Images between South Korea and North Korea

Hans D. Christ

This essay on the works of NOH Suntag advances along the eight series of photographs presented at the Württembergischer Kunstverein, along the distinctly rhythmized sequences inherent therein as well as the aesthetic strategies of the individual images. Background information on the history and politics of Korea referenced by NOH Suntag in his works are taken up in parallel in the form of accompanying text in the footnote section. Simultaneously, the essay follows the architecture developed for the exhibition to highlight the openly expressed interrelations between the series. In this respect, an attempt will be made to elaborate, in the following, a text-image body facilitating between the different planes of reflection: the serial, sequential, and singular image structure as well as the spatial experience of narration. The concept of expounding on NOH Suntag's work along the site of his exposition ensues from the conviction that art intrinsically generates specific interpretive means through the context (the exhibition institution) and the constellation (spatial reference fields) in which it is presented. Here the focus is not on the reconstruction or even authentic recall of the spatial experience by means of a written text, but rather on making this absent experience constructively useful for the work descriptions.

Architecture

The exhibition was shown in the so-called Square Hall (*Viereckssaal*), a thirty-six-square-meter-wide veritable "white cube." The specially developed architecture made it possible to realize the apparent linearity of the series in the exhibition space through graduated lines as well as to arrange concurrent lineups and cross-references between the series. Decisive here was that the internal connections within NOH Suntag's photo series only ever follow relative constellations, which he newly configures according to interest focus and context.[1] It was the artist's process of perpetually reinterpreting his own work that permitted—in accordance with the exhibition theme "state of emergency"—the siring of additional interpretational means prompted by the interior architecture. The spatial gradation of the two-dimensional area—a space often selected for the planning of exhibitions—embodies the most simple pictorial means

1 The series "State of Emergency," having formed the thematic anchor for the Stuttgart exhibition, developed from multiple series, such as the image sequences from "Wrong Island" or "Pictorial Riot Police." In addition, the series integrates images compiled from the past nine years.

for creating perspectives using layering, enlargement, and reduction between image foreground and background. This constructive technique creates various vanishing points that form optional aisles of meaning between the image layers—a principle adhered to by the exhibition image sequences incorporated into this essay.

Conveyed into the three-dimensional exhibition space, a multiplication of possible constructions of meaning arise, in contrast, in relation to the constantly changing viewer positions and to the associated spatial shifts and superimpositions of the image references. The diffusion inevitably arising through the persistently changing perspectives is inherently similar to the way in which NOH Suntag negotiates territories—localities, landscapes, architectures, the view into and out of the image—as ambivalent, multilayered reference systems.

NOH Suntag's photographs were taken in South Korea and North Korea. As such, the titles of three of his series already denote those contradictions and fractures of elementary significance for his treatment of both sides of the Korean reality: "Red House I. North Korea in North Korea," "Red House II. Give and Take," and "Red House III. North Korea in South Korea." A relationship between South Korea to the North is revealed here, one that references not so much the sufficiently familiar division of the two nations but instead a reciprocal relationship characterized by ambivalences. Thus, the development of the exhibition architecture could not serve to replicate the South-North axis; instead, it traced the projections of the one onto the other. "I know of North Korea. I don't know what I know about it." This note by NOH Suntag introduces the series "Red House II," and in the introduction to the catalogue *Red House*[2] he writes: "North Korea—from my childhood to the present—has provided me with small sections of my memory. It was both a taboo subject and an object of curiosity, a wonderland and also a mirror. Perhaps another 'I' lives in North Korea who possesses diverse forms of random memories of South Korea—this is how I imagine it to be." North Korea in this view is an indeterminate white spot inversely determining the conception of one's self, both as counterpart and as "terra incognita," without the "I" from this mirror image ever becoming personally tangible as one's self. If one wasn't delineating two complementary national systems, that is, dealing with a projection field of high abstraction, this state would be characterized as a traumatic experience on the brink of schizophrenia. Furthermore, the artist made the decision to record this view in a blind mirror by means of an inherently blind device, the camera—that apparatus imaging light reflections, guaranteeing the author of the light recording only one thing, namely that he was there, that

2 NOH Suntag, *Red House [:Red Frame]* (Seoul, 2007).

the recording took place.[3] Reflection, realized through images, on the reality of everyday Korean life in a divided country thus arises against the backdrop of two paradoxes: the impossibility of being able to fashion a picture of the "other" (the North), and the putting-into-use of this picture-less opponent as cause and effect of one's own condition (the South).

The camera as a recording medium, being intrinsically blind, potentizes this paradoxical constellation. André Bazin precisely labels it thus: "Photography enjoys a certain advantage in virtue of this transference of reality from the thing to its reproduction. A very faithful drawing may actually tell us more about the model, but despite the promptings of our critical intelligence it will never have the irrational power of the photograph to bear away our faith."[4]

The exhibition attempted to substantiate these media-related and real-life dilemmas. At the beginning of the circuit, viewers were confronted with two series that, for one, offered possible appropriations of reality by means of emblematic and symbolic representatives and that also emphasized the optical apparatus itself.

Black Hook Down

The first series in the exhibition—presented as a multipart wall montage—was entitled "Black Hook Down."

"Black Hook Down" [BHD]

The title is owed to a play on words, equally alluding to the icon representing the technical and military supremacy of the United States of America—the helicopter "Black Hawk" and the film mystifying it, *Black Hawk Down*[5]—and to Peter Pan's adversary, Captain Hook.[6] Emerging from this seemingly simple linguistic shift are various patterns of reflection. In the first place, we are familiar with the outcome of the fairy tale *Peter Pan*, where the small boy with a talent for flying defeats his all-powerful opponent. Secondly, we are aware of the implausibility of fairy tales coming to life: manifested in the symbol "Black Hawk" is neither the success of the child nor such enduring global supremacy. Topicality speaking a different language can be ignored for now in favor of the fictional, marvelous realm of possibility.

3 In the era of wireless transmission and the expansion of surveillance technologies, this naturally only conditionally applies. However, for the images in question here, the relationship between image and presence of the photographer is always a given.

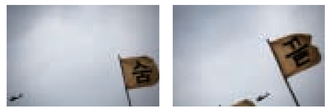
4 André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," in *What Is Cinema?*, vol. 1, ed. Hugh Gray (Berkeley, 2004), p. 14.

5 *Black Hawk Down*, Director: Ridley Scott, USA 2001. The film portrays events taking place during the military intervention by the United States in Somalia in 1993, in the context of which two well-known helicopters were shot down. A fierce battle evolved surrounding the rescue of the helicopter crews, with eighteen democracy-promoting U.S. soldiers and circa 1,000 Somalians dying. The film, financed by the U.S. military, showed impressive images of the heroic battle and the tragic deaths of the U.S. soldiers. The local enemies simply toppled down.

6 The story of the small boy from Neverland has been filmed on a number of occasions since 1924 and is based on a novella and a play by James Matthew Barrie, *Peter Pan, or The Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up*, from 1904.

The first image in the series [BHD #1] places the projection space—in this case, the sky over Korea—in a proportional relationship with the "helicopter" symbol. Centered at the lower image border, "Black Hawk" appears as a small, black, purely graphic abbreviation on a homogenous blue surface. Set off from the rest of the wall montage, this introduction strikingly anticipates the change in perspective to come about in the following. Exactly which change in perspective is implied is disclosed in the second image [BHD #5], for the object of interest in the image is additionally framed by a black surface. Who is viewing whom here, and which power structure reversal is implied as event in the image, couldn't be accentuated more clearly.

In the ensuing progression, a turbulent image sequence develops, capturing the helicopter in all positions: plunging, upside down, microscopically reduced, or enlarged to fill the image. The aircraft employed for observation itself becomes the one pursued by the seemingly omnipresent image machine. As noted above, this involves a fairy tale, and the shifted power structures are not those of hero and anti-hero; instead, the conflict is vicariously carried out by two technical apparatuses, with one representing a national power, and the other only temporarily allowing a fictional reversal of reality facilitated by technical potency. At the end of the series [BHD #27, #28], the camera viewfinder vacates the open projection space "sky," and two text banners enter the picture imparting: "Till the Last Breath."



This has lead us to the territorial determination assigning the conflict to a concrete locality. These protest flags were raised by Daechu-ri farmers

as an expression of their protest against the seizure of their lands by U.S. armed forces and the related dispossession of their landholdings. The sky above the town always swarms—roaringly, menacingly—with the "Black Hawks" when the farmers gather to protest. Important to distinguish here is—aside from the concrete, factual appearance of the "protecting power USA" as a reference to Korean history and to current conflict potential—the clear appropriation of the representational potential of photography, and the role of the driving force directing the camera toward the object of reflection: NOH Suntag. What Bazin termed "irrational power of the photograph" becomes evident in a fairy tale constructed by the apparatus, with the author organizing the segments of this story with a coherency that in reality doesn't apply.[7] In this sense, the exhibition approached a contradiction inherent in the image: the impossibility of representing the world through photography, and the possibility of reporting on it anyways as translated through images.

Red House II. Give and Take

"Black Hook Down" was displayed opposite the aforementioned image series "Red House II. Give and Take."

"Red House II. Give and Take," 2001–2006 [RH II]

Since 2001, NOH Suntag has regularly traveled to North Korea.[8] As soon as visitors cross the high-security Demilitarized Zone (DMZ)[9] at the 38th parallel, their relationship to the reality of their immediate surroundings changes in many respects. For one, the crossover leads through a room permeated by constant surveillance, where, secondly, what is allowed to be seen is closely determined and controlled. Surveillance, here, is everything, as is the anticipation of that to be observed. The other reality shift immediately materializing is related to the absurdity of finding oneself behind the last "Iron Curtain." Here one has arrived in a present-day anachronism, the truth of which only reveals the certainty that the visitors will never catch sight of it. The way in which being at another place and in another time,

7 See Victor Burgin, "Photography, Fantasy, Function," in *Thinking Photography* (London, 1982), p. 146. The sentence modifies a quotation by Victor Burgin: ". . . [T]hrough the agency of the frame, the world is organized into a coherence which it actually lacks, into a parade of tableaux, a succession of decisive moments."

8 Since the beginning of the nineteen-nineties and with the emergence of "sunshine politics"—envisaging a gradual rapprochement between the countries—regular travel from South Korea into the North has been possible (in the opposite direction, travel is only allowed for selected persons). Only a handful of travel destinations in North Korea are attainable as determined by the North Korean dictatorship in accord with their interests. It is possible to fly to Pyongyang, or to enter the country by bus. In both cases, as soon as the border is crossed, the travel route is supervised by security agents monitoring, for instance, what is photographed by whom and when, or who initiates contact with whom. Bus tours are offered by the company Hyundai Asan, a subsidiary of the so-called *chaebols* (conglomerates), the state-sponsored oligarchies controlling considerably large sections of the South Korean economy. A portion of the proceeds from the expensive travel offers are paid to the dictatorship. In addition to the opening of the border for tourists, a free industrial zone is presently being created in the North near Gaeseong, with the establishment of an infrastructure for 300 manufacturers in the apparel industry and electronics being planned. In connection with the socialist dictatorship under KIM Jong-il, the South appears to be targeting the North as a low-wage hinterland. Significant for this development, aside from prospects for personal profit, is the consideration that an economically destabilized North would harbor even greater danger.

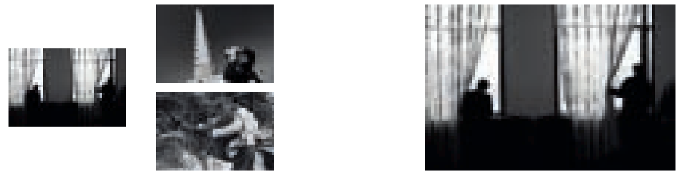
9 The abbreviation stands for "Demilitarized Zone" and denotes the border between South Korea and North Korea, which divides the Korean Peninsula with a four-kilometer-wide belt from east to west.

where imaging is not countenanced, is compensated is explained by NOH Suntag himself: "Regardless of the situation, a visit to North Korea will be a continual reminder that this could be one's last visit to the country. The 'ritual of photographing' thereby becomes a nondeferrable duty. After having barely set one's foot in the forbidden land, every visitor feels obliged to partake in this ritual as 'last' witness."[10] Similar to an optimized experimental set-up, the relationship between image and reality stands for itself. As Flusser says, "… the world is not immediately accessible to them [human beings] and therefore images are needed to make it comprehensible. However, as soon as this happens, images come between the world and human beings. They are supposed to be maps but they turn into screens: Instead of representing the world, they obscure it until human beings' lives finally become a function of the images they create."[11] The endless duplication of the always identical screens—through umpteen South Koreans equipped with cameras, forever capturing the same motifs while being perpetually observed—constitutes the actual point of departure for the photo series "Give and Take."

And NOH Suntag, with the first image in the series [RH II #1], immediately gives us a feeling for the place we occupy in this vision of blind images when the security officer escorting the travel group fixates his gaze on us from within the image. "The lesson of the dialectic of the double is therefore the discordance between eye and gaze: there certainly is in the mirror image 'more than meets the eye,' yet this surplus that eludes the eye, the point in the image which eludes my eye's grasp, is none other than *the gaze itself*: as Lacan put it, 'you can never see me at the point from which I gaze at you.'"[12] The gaze may be directed toward us, and one could suppose that an instantaneous exchange takes place between subject/viewer and object/image. However, this is somewhat of a lasting affect, since the longer the gaze is perceived, the more clear it becomes that within the image a relation is framed that eludes our own gaze. The relationship emerging is one realized by the photographer not standing in the image at a moment occurring in another time. The photographer freezes in the viewfinder, in the first frame, a gaze relation that cannot be palpably located. Who is being caught by whom in this scene? Is not the elusive gaze over the shoulder the gaze of the followed? Or is it the punitive gaze of the security agency that actually

10 NOH 2007 (see note 2).
11 Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (London, 2000), pp. 9–10.
12 Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (New York, 2001), pp. 126–27.

moves the photographer to thus focus the viewfinder? This ambiguity is further intensified by the staging of the photo, which executes the gaze as a prominent and, due to daylight use of the flash, perfectly lighted point/spot in the image. Was the gaze in the moment of capture by the flash not itself blind? We don't know, for we are positioned radically to the outside of the image.
In the sequence following this image [RH II #2–#5], the other members of the tour group are caught, barricaded behind their cameras and camcorders, in the image, already taking masses of shots after having barely just arrived at the airfield, capturing spaces that NOH Suntag, in turn, does not show us.
In the next image [RH II #6], we see two protagonists from behind, arranged as if in a film still, peering toward an outside that is not visible: a setting reminiscent of Alfred Hitchcock's film *Rear Window*, where a photographer is damned to immobility because of a broken leg and his relationship to the outside world can only be mirrored from his room.



Starting with this hinged image, typical for the structure of NOH Suntag's image series, a perambulation of the series ensues with familiar locations along the common travel routes through the North. The ritual of photography always plays a role in the image, appearing as a fixture in those settings shown off by the socialist power apparatus.[13]
"From time to time, cameras function as a bridge between people wanting to share a feeling of friendship and remembrance. When this happens, one is more than happy to assist someone as a photographer."[14] We see how the North Korean photographs the South Korean, and the South Korean also the North Korean. It seems absurd: the camera as a bridge for social interaction, as a substitute for communication. One person voluntarily positions the camera toward another person, with the understanding of creating a well-balanced image of the other, transferring something from the North into the South, and vice versa, as a vestige of memory. The omnipresence of the camera appears to act here as a mediator between two realities. This viewpoint would indeed correlate with a romantic ascription of the situation. If the pair from the South allow themselves to be photographed arm in arm by one of the "tour guides" [RH II #8], then they have all long become comfortable with the gestures and conventions,

13 Regarding the individual images, the locations for the series are consolidated in an index. Fundamentally, there are four types of localities accessible to tourists and journalists: landscapes, system-conformant architectures, monuments, and industrial premises. The scenically imposing Kumgang-san Mountains (Diamond Mountains), located directly adjacent to the border, are situated in the first region to be developed for tourists. Though originally only accessible via maritime route, today regular day tours are offered by bus to this area. The Myohyang-san range (Mysterious Fragrant Mountain) in northeast North Korea and the imposing crater lake Chonji (Lake of Heaven), near Baekdu-san Mountain and the Chinese border, are among the common sites visited on all travel routes through North Korea. Characteristic for all three sites is their exploitation for the personality cult surrounding KIM Il-sung and his son KIM Jong-il. Here the scenic grandeur, its related mythological charge, and the religious significance of the sites are interwoven with political relevance and utilized to promote the national doctrine "Juche." For instance, in the Myohyang-san range the "Friendship Exhibition Hall" can be found—alongside the largest Buddhist temple complex "Pohyon" and several Buddhist hermitages—where diverse presents from other socialist rulers such as Fidel Castro or Nicolae Ceauceşcu are "exhibited." Baekdu-san Mountain and Chonji Lake are connected to the historical myth of the first Korean kingdom (Dangun myth). On the mountain itself, a log cabin also serves as a tourist attraction, since KIM Jong-suk bore KIM Jong-il, son of the eternal president KIM Il-sung, here. The latter, in turn, set off from here on his heroic battle against the Japanese occupying forces that had completely annexed Korea from 1910 to 1945. These grotesque entanglements of propaganda lies, personality cults, Stalinist socialism, religiosity, and nationalism can be found at almost all travel destinations. In Pyongyang this is particularly embodied by the Juche Tower, rising to a height of 170 meters, built to commemorate the seventieth birthday of KIM Il-sung. Furthermore, other monumental sculptures glorifying the dictator and the people of laborers and farmers have been erected near the tower. The Juche Tower stands for the form of socialist führer state implemented by KIM Il-sung that is characterized, in addition to the already mentioned interlacing of personality cults and nationalism, by a radical isolationism. Although the population has nearly doubled since 1945, with approximately twenty-three million people living in the North today, almost no foreigners reside in North Korea with the exception of a small Chinese minority. All electronic wireless networks and the country's federally authorized Intranet are monitored. Almost no information about the world beyond the borders is available. Internment and work camps and their implementation serve to maintain this system. Whether expanding tourism is endangering this isolation is currently being investigated. But since the government doesn't want to forgo this income source, a forced relocation of residents in tourist areas is being considered. The media and the educational apparatus are likewise subject to Juche ideology and have taken up residence, for instance, at central educational institutions such as at the Mangyongdae Children's Palace in Pyongyang, which is a must for all visitor groups. This tour along institutional self-representation is supplemented by a visit to the Choson Film Studio, founded in 1946. A number of KIM Il-sung's heroic novellas have been filmed here in his honor. One could at this point report on further absurdities, such as the doxologies carved into the side of the Myohyang-san Mountain glorifying KIM Il-sung and KIM Jong-il, but it has already been made sufficiently clear how trips into North Korea are structured and why no adequate picture of North Korea can be obtained along these routes. We only see symbols representing a totalitarian regime.
14 NOH 2007 (see note 2).

devolved from the medium into reality, that even in an extremely isolated country like North Korea would be considered common sense. Here the medium is infecting all culture with sameness,[15] though not in the sense of an approximation but rather as requirement of the medium. Hence, in the "shot-countershot shooting" between NOH Suntag and the security officer photographing the artist, only an impression of the represented person remains, a puppet in uniform, frozen while posing, whose face—that pivotal

space where the counterpart becomes another—is entirely concealed by the camera [RH II #9]. All here is suspended in medial relation: posture, gentle leaning step, upper body bent slightly forward, and the camera framed by both hands all serve image stabilization (or—purely mechanically speaking—as a tripod), simultaneously aligning themselves from lens to lens along the central-perspective line. As if this did not suffice, the camera's carrying strap is falling precisely like a perpendicular, vertically down along the center of gravity. The intensely dark surface in the background diagonally divides the image into two halves and frames the white edge of the military peaked cap at its border, leveling out, in favor of the perspectival composition, the entire surroundings in the bipolar configuration of the two cameras. "Perspective is an image of what we would term ideology—a historical, cultural formation masking itself as universal, natural code."[16] The apparent phenomenon in the works of NOH Suntag stems from the artist so evidently embracing perspective, staging, and composition "as a complex interplay between visuality, apparatus, [institution], discourse, body and figurality"[17] so that they are no longer suited to mask the natural but instead highlight the point of reflection beyond the optical apparatus. This also applies to the subsequent image pair [RH II #14, #15], where the subject "cityscape" and the combinatorial system "diptych" are taken up.

While we were initially concerned with the spaces where those photographing acted as extras against the backdrop of the "successful"

15 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford, 2002), p. 94. The sentence modifies the statement: "Culture today is infecting everything with sameness."
16 W. J. T. Mitchell, "Der Pictorial Turn," in *Privileg Blick: Kritik der visuellen Kultur*, ed. Christian Kravagna (Berlin, 1997), p. 34. See also W. J. T. Mitchell, "The Pictorial Turn," *ARTFORUM* (March 1992), p. 91.
17 Ibid.

self-dramatization by totalitarian Juche socialism, now a gigantic "system error" slips into the scene, in the middle of Pyongyang: the Ryugyong Hotel.[18]

In the year 1987 the construction project commenced, striving for nothing less than the realization of the biggest hotel in the world. In 1992 construction was halted. Since then, situated in the city center and therefore in direct relation to other self-dramatizations on the part of the dictatorship, the 330-meter-high, downright useless concrete skeleton towers over the city of Pyongyang. The building itself is, due to its prominent position, represented in numerous photo books on North Korea in stellar reproduction quality, redoubling the documentary scope of this utopia's fictitiousness. In contrast, NOH Suntag pulls the monument back behind a grey veil where the regime's failure is allineated with the high-rise tenements. The fanaticism with which this megalomaniac "scurrility" has massively—in both senses of the word—inscribed itself in public space is consolidated, by means of equal treatment of the aesthetic surfaces, with the fatal consequences for life beyond representation, a suspicion of which exists, but no images. In this diptych, NOH Suntag again confronts us with his strategy for leaving tracks by charging and veiling images whose obviousness may be evident but whose encoding visibly lies behind the images.

In the following sequence, the scene is altered to silhouette-like images, with an equestrian monument or silhouettes of isolated persons appearing against vivid backlight [RH II #17, #18]. They appear mighty in their consolidation and, at the same time, like removed and placeless figures. "Solidarity" displayed in sizable letters on the high-rise in the background of the second image in the sequence causes the distance between the flattened person in the image and the penetration of powerful representation to emerge as a beacon of this pictorial space.

The sublime moment is often described as rapture or quaking on the part of the subject when confronted with the unattainable and incalculable. Through an awareness of the self contrasting with this experience, the

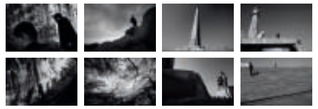
18 The Ryugyong Hotel was to have more than 105 stories, 3,000 rooms, several revolving restaurants, casinos, and nightclubs. KIM Il-sung is said to have conceived of this hotel pyramid construction idea while visiting his comrade Nicolae Ceaușescu, who at that time had already been working to create the "House of the People" in Bucharest. The dimensions of these buildings were, considering their converted space of circa 350,000 square meters, comparable to the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. or to the "City of Arts and Science" in Valencia, which were all in a position to compete with other mega-architectures in contention for being included among the greatest architectural structures in the world. This demand for "higher, bigger, more expensive" consequently appears to be not only a phenomenon of socialist dictatorships but rather also of Western democracies or capitalistic corporations. However, in the case of the Ryugyong Hotel the relativity is incommensurable being that its construction devoured, to the sum of 750 million U.S. dollars, two percent of the gross domestic product at a time when large sections of the North Korean population were going hungry. Moreover, the building remains widely visible in Pyongyang but has been erased from current city maps and is ignored by powerholders. In the overall picture as respects this "system error," irrationality culminates precisely at this point between absolute presence and consequent denial.

subject, one would hope, becomes sovereign, thus able to effect its actions out of the margin between the uncanny and the visible. The motif that must act as the focal catalyst for this experiential possibility is that of wild, frenetic nature. The image pair following the urban settings begins with a dramatic landscape draped by a stunningly agitated sky [RH II #19], highlighting this sublime experiential space and concurrently sealing it for observation. Baekdu-san Mountain and Chonji Lake are portrayed, enfolded in religious and nationalistic myths and legends spawned in relation to KIM Il-sung and KIM Jong-il.[19] There is no perception of this nature with its double coding—pathos of nature and propaganda—that offers an equivalent to the experience of sublimity. Everything here is distinguished by signs, just as NOH Suntag's photographs are fraught with historical quotations. The image's similarity to an icon of landscape photography—Ansel Adams's "The Tetons and the Snake River" (1942)—cannot be a coincidence.[20] In direct proximity to this "image quotation," a picture of a pathetic monumental sculpture of the eternal president KIM Il-sung is presented [RH II #20]. The sculptural schematic along with the resulting photographic vantage point from a relatively lowered position, in turn, are reminiscent—and neither is this coincidental—of pictures of the Abraham Lincoln Memorial in the National Mall in Washington, D.C.[21] Furthermore, in the dark, behind the dictator carved in stone, the landscape at Baekdu-san is recognizable.


Is this diptych, in its allusive similitude, circumscribing a mirror relationship between the monumentalization of a North Korean tyrant and that of a U.S. president, between the political instrumentalization of nature along two intrinsically contrary national ideologies of sublimity? Can this be? A president willing to wage a civil war for the abolition of slavery and a fanatic enveloping an entire nation with violence and radical isolation? More essential here than the factual history is the facet of how symbols begin to share resemblance throughout history.[22] By merging these forms of meaning production, NOH Suntag specifies a condition that positions as absolute the representation of the political and nationalistic in a shroud of sublimity. Of concern is the mirror relationship between totalitarianism and a liberalization ossified in the totalitarian. Amidst the series "Red House I. Give and Take," a cleavage thus manifests on the horizon, highlighting a key point in NOH Suntag's works. In which image constellations do political

19 See note 13.
20 NOH Suntag himself referenced this connection during a conversation.
21 The intimation that the primary focus of interest in this image combination is not constituted by the sufficiently established, stylistically similar monumental sculptures of other socialist leaders was provided by NOH Suntag. Furthermore, the contours of the sculptures in relationship to each other offer an indication of their interconnectivity. The antiquity-style throne is, in the "socialist variant," a plain arm chair with armrests which, however, end in two classical convolutions. The clothing is bourgeois and at the same time typical dress for farmers, workers, et cetera. Analogous to the "Lake of Heaven" and the historical myth of the first Korean kingdom, both representative of the North Korean dictatorship, is the Greek Temple of Zeus at Olympia in a Western context.
22 While the Abraham Lincoln Memorial formed the scenic backdrop for Martin Luther King's famous speech, spawning the words "I have a dream" for the history books, the Vietnam War Memorial and the Korean War Memorial have meanwhile also been erected in the near vicinity.

confrontations emerge as cause and effect of their symbolic representatives, again becoming the agency identical to their symbols? In the mirror only the violence potential of the other appears as determinant for that of the self, and hence for a fundamentally paranoid condition. NOH Suntag uses the direct juxtaposition between pathetically charged nature and führer monument to unveil the pathos formulas—transcending any ideological boundaries—presented here and can therefore adapt them for critical questioning.
As the series [RH II #21–#28] progresses, the narration continues with glorifications of KIM Il-sung chiseled in stone and with other articulations of power, where we again may only observe that which permits observation.




Like the shadows in Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" do visitors appear against the Myohyang-san Mountain cliffs, as projections of a world of which they are unaware, while their own silhouettes are superimposed with insignia of power. And release from the cave, of course, cannot be imagined, since one too strongly credits the symbols, adopting their incarnation as a state of reality.



In the subsequent image sequence, we meander from the cave back into the city, initially into a setting which, with its modernist architectural ambience, calls to mind film noir spy classics [RH II #29]. We accompany security agents through a "street" at the Choson Film Studio, reaching a film set, erected for propaganda purposes, rendering a "South Korean" clinic for venereal diseases [RH II #30, #31]. At the end a vertically held cigarette is smoking in front of Pyongyang's urban silhouette, creating an analogon to the Juche Tower looming in the background [RH II #32]. Is this a profane sacrifice in Buddhist tradition for socialist ideology? Or is it an ironic gemination of phallic power representation ebbing here? Both are conceivable, but NOH Suntag primarily alludes to the ban on photographing the Juche Tower in any skewed form, or in connection with oblique elements (precipitous perspectives, power supply lines, etc.). The equation between "vertical cigarette" and "vertical tower" almost ideally parallels

the dictatorship's dictum and is simultaneously a commentary banalizing the potency of power that retains impunity.

A similar inversion of representational structures was already encountered in the wall montage "Black Hook Down," which configured the spatial transection between "Give and Take" and the succeeding series "North Korea in South Korea" in the exhibition space.

Red House III. North Korea in South Korea

From the pictorial narration of shifted power structures and the even scenes of the dictatorship, we arrive at the next asynchronous narration on territorially structured mirror relationships, already heralded in the series title "North Korea in South Korea."

"Red House III. North Korea in South Korea," 2004–2007 [RH III]

The first image in this inscription of the North in the South of Korea places us before an unspectacular agricultural landscape [RH III #1]. Our access to this landscape is encumbered by the poignantly traced materiality, represented in shades of grey, of a bast mat, a wooden bench, a blanket

embroidered with patterns, and a highly polished, gleaming metal railing. The sole person in the picture, with only legs visible, is mantled by the patterned blanket. In the background we see, as if viewing from the edge of a stage to which we have no access, lengths of plastic film covering the field, until a forested chain of hills on the horizon sections off the stage. Bast mat, blanket, bench, railing, plastic film: Why is such an aesthetically perfectly staged display of concealment pursued? Was it sublimated in this landscape? Why does this image occupy a frontal placing in a series engaged with the mirroring of the North in the South? An older Korean

23 Labels and placards explicating the context relevant to the images and series are an integral part of NOH Suntag's work.
24 The Korean War took place between 1950 and 1953. Following the Second World War, two separate zones were established along the 38th parallel, the North being controlled by the Soviet Union and the South by the United States. In 1948 an independent election commission was delegated to the South by the United Nations and charged with carrying out elections for the whole of Korea. This was accepted by neither the Soviet Union nor the already established communists under KIM Il-sung. Consequently, the elections—strongly influenced by the West—only took place in the South. The resulting government declared itself as having sole authority to govern all of Korea and founded the Republic of Korea. Barely fourteen days later, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea was proclaimed in the North. Due to the world being, following World War II, split into two different ideological camps, South Korea was not recognized by the Eastern Bloc, nor was North Korea by the West. From the very beginning, military encroachment took place along the border between North Korea and South Korea, escalating successively during the year 1950. Theories on who actually initiated the war remain divergent. In any case, the South was concerned that showing hesitation about a final confrontation would lead to an invariably growing military supremacy of the North. Before the North attacked the South, a massive thrust was made from South to North, causing the North to justify striking back just as powerfully. The quick success experienced by the North—Seoul was taken in only three days—motivated the continuation of the intervention war. Thus, hostility from the "Cold War" became a "Hot War." The occupation by the North stretched all the way to the southern tip of the Korean Peninsula, so that only one territory near Busan could be retained. Already during the first year the UN, under U.S. command, entered the war and penetrated the North Korean line in Incheon, causing the North Koreans to be pushed back to the 38th parallel. Since no clear UN resolution was in effect detailing the objective of the war (ending the war at the 38th parallel or else conquering the entire peninsula), the United States and South Korea decided to continue fighting. Despite warnings on the part of the Chinese that an advance through the North to the Chinese border would not be accepted, the war was carried on with heavy employment of weapons of mass destruction. When the acts of war reached the Chinese border, China entered the war with circa 300,000 soldiers. Though the U.S. Air Force employed napalm bombs and new demolition bombs, in particular, U.S. Army and South Korean Army troops were pushed back to the 38th parallel, where subdued static warfare ensued. In 1953 an armistice treaty was finally signed, confirming the division of Korea pretty much exactly along the same border progression present before the war. During the successive three years, the fratricidal war twice enveloped the entire country, whereby eighteen of the twenty larger cities across the entire peninsula were fifty to ninety percent destroyed by the massive deployment of the U.S. Air Force. War crimes were committed by both ends on the civilian population. By the end of the war, approximately 800,000 soldiers and close to three million civilians had been killed. The fact that so little was publicized about the most brutal war of the Cold War Era was in part due to the anti-communist alignment of the U.S. media during the McCarthy Era.

beholder will realize—after reading the name of the town Uiryeong-gun on the image description[23] at the latest—which story is hiding behind the surface of this facing of space. This locality was the site of one of the most sanguinary Korean War battlefields,[24] where the rural population suffered especially, quashed between the perpetually changing fronts. International historians such as Bruce Cumings characterize the Korean War as the forgotten or unknown war.[25] In South Korea itself one could instead speak of an unresolved war that has been tattooed into everyday life, the encumbrance of which is attributed solely to the "brother" in the North by large sections of the population, even after fifty-five years.[26] This war, along with the question of responsible parties, has left a traumatizing collective interior gap in the South and has also, in the face of the menacing other, educed a field of projection applicable both politically and ideologically. The prognosis for conflict geared toward the North resulting from this pathology has permanently pulled the former war into the present. NOH Suntag labels this a "state of emergency" in his photography—where everything is ensconced behind an expansive composition of surfaces, textures, and patterns, yet in which the fatal context has been inscribed—requiring unremitting compensation.

Directly neighboring this photograph we see a pair gazing, arm in arm, past the Demilitarized Zone, that insurmountable border,[27] into the North [RH III #2]. Following the romantic impression of a yearning glance toward the other is the architecture of containers on which slogans by radical nationalists[28] can be read [RH III #3]. In the jargon of anti-communist propaganda, they demand, for one, an increased U.S. military presence and reject any approximation to the North. Here "displacement activity" springs from the compensational, hysterically abrading its own mirror image. NOH Suntag repeatedly integrates language into his images in the form of public slogans, appeals, or advertising. In this respect, it occasionally references the embedding of images not visible in the picture, such as in the photograph where a series of image-generating equipment makes an appearance, where we are denied of the gaze [RH III #5].

25 Bruce Cumings, "Der Vernichtungsfeldzug der US Air Force: Napalm über Korea," *Le Monde Diplomatique* 7536 (December 10, 2004). See also Bruce Cumings and Jon Halliday, *Korea: The Unknown War* (New York, 1988).
26 At present negotiations are being conducted in an attempt to transform the 1953 armistice, classified as a state of war under international law, into a peace treaty.
27 On both sides diverse concepts for a reunification (e.g., in the form of a federation or confederation) exist, but indications of the times imply differently. The conglomerates having arisen from the military dictatorship in the South (*chaebols*)—controlling up to forty percent of exports, nearly the whole power industry, electronics production, heavy industry, media industry, et cetera, and even penetrating as far as small-scale subcontractors—are currently investing, with government support, in the North and thereby not only stabilizing the dictatorship but also establishing new territorial developments founded on optimized exploitation. This seemingly cynical process stems from the concrete context of the South Korean economy (impoverishment of the rural population, absent social protection systems, enormous import revenue, etc.) being under immense pressure as positioned between Japan and up-and-coming China, and being not presently capable of coping with a reunification situation. The proportional relationship between population (forty-eight million in the South, twenty-three million in the North) and significant impoverishment in the North would invariably lead to an economic catastrophe. For purposes of objectivity and to comment on ostensible parallels, it should not be left unsaid that Germany's reunification rested on a national uprising in the East and was hardly the form of reunification favored by Western economists. Such a national uprising is, however, not to be expected in North Korea. At present, the conflict between South Korea and North Korea is aggravated by the excessively nationalistic position of the incumbent South Korean president LEE Myung-bak, elected in 2008.
28 The term "nationalists" is used in this text with reference to right-wing nationalists. The label does not hold a primarily negative connotation in Korea but is rather a constituent part of most all political organizations and also deeply rooted in the general population. This is due, for instance, to the territorial situation as "microstate" between two Asian superpowers (China, Japan), to national instability (division of Korea), and to limited national sovereignty in the South (U.S. presence).

We see a subject coupled with the apparatus and read an advertising text which promises to yield, for five hundred won (circa fifty euro cents), North Korea's "holy" and "heavenly beautiful" locations as well as its lifestyle with the newest stereoscopy procedure. These are the same locations previously introduced in the series "Give and Take." In these photographs, as well as in some others, we view those viewers wired with "image machines" as they linger at one of many so-called "unification observatories" erected both domestically and in the Demilitarized Zone. Observatories are places for scanning the galaxies for unfamiliar celestial bodies, for sallying forth on travels to distant worlds, but which rarely attempt to negotiate a *realpolitik*-related problem such as the reunification between both Korean countries.[29] Between appearance, mimesis, and idealization—or so we surmise from the other side of the image, for we naturally cannot look into the apparatus—do fiction and illusion both escalate to a hyperreality, only imitating a nation of "Korea" feasible in simulation. Off in the distance in the exhibition space we can glance back at the tourist photographing the North in the series "Give and Take" and are reminded of the impossibility of producing an image beyond the totalitarian self-representation of this

system. In the observatories projecting a promising North, the image of absolute entanglement of apparatus and beholder molds the impression of complete isolation from the outside and of a relation to reality between North Korea and South Korea, enduringly having the other present as a mirror, the impression at the same time suspended in the surplus of representation.[30] "Human beings cease to decode the images and instead project them, still encoded, into the world 'out there,' which meanwhile itself becomes like an image—a context of scenes, of states of things."[31] The "freely" disposable projection space of North Korea, as generated by simulators of the future—being nothing more than "imaginary interior[s] of medial standards"[32]—is resealed in the next sequence of the series through the photographic views of dioramas and displays from the War Museum in Seoul.[33]

Both diorama photographs [RH III #11, #13] crop the portrayed scenarios at the top image border and as such counteract the illusionism of the showcase. The soldiers are only shown below the waist. We know nothing about the site of activity or about the end of the story. We only recognize

29 The new discovery of a star may by all means be connected to the idea of expanding national territories, yet regarding a direct transference to real political consequences it is associated with an extremely distant future and is hardly so elementarily formative for the present as is Korea's divided state.

30 In the image simulators, not only representations of existing sites in the North are created but also future visions of amusement parks on both sides of the border. These are also reapplied to banners whose design is reminiscent of notices for upcoming construction projects.

31 Flusser 2000 (see note 11), p. 10.

32 Friedrich Kittler, "Dracula's Legacy," in *Literature, Media, Information Systems: Essays (Critical Voices in Art, Theory and Culture)*, trans. William Stephen Davis (Amsterdam, 1997).

33 Museal representations of the Korean War can be found at many locations in Korea, including along the DMZ and frequently in combination with the unification observatories.

an endeavor to realistically emulate a historical, musealized war scene, the horizon of which lies beyond the picture. In combination with the promises made by the unification observatories, the slogans of the radical nationalists, and the yearning view into the North, an ambivalent state becomes apparent where the focus on the North apparently only permits a reaction to the individual condition by means of exaggeration, of shifting to simulacra, and of the instrumentalization of war as an unresolved past. Statically speaking, this forms a totally diametrical picture than that of a highly technological, dynamic nation, as is fabricated in other stereotypes of South Korea. The extent to which the North impresses itself on the South becomes equally tangible and, in its symbolic transfer, apparent in the last two photographs of the series [RH III #14, #15]. In 2007, NOH Suntag took part in an exhibition with painter SUN-mu, who had flown in from the North, at the

Hogisim Gallery in Seoul. The exhibition included a portrait of North Korean dictator KIM Jong-il. A passerby viewing the image turned to the local police station and, in doing so, was acting completely in accord with the National Security Law in effect since 1948 in South Korea,[34] where citizens are expected to notify authorities of any breaches of the law. And in this case there was ultimately suspicion that the portraiture of KIM Jong-il could be associated with a positive depiction of the communist North, which remains a criminal act. NOH Suntag captures the moment in which a civilian policeman documents the exhibition in order to pass on the pictures for inspection by the agency a step higher. Apparent here is how the thoroughly ambivalent situation—deriving from the permanent mirroring of an already acutely abstract threat from the North[35]—yields effects for the political-ideological climate in the South. The shadow of a monumental sculpture portraying the dictator, arising beyond the photographing police officer, looks to be shaking the hand of this officer of public order as if in greeting.

The image vocabulary developed by NOH Suntag in the series "North Korea in South Korea" references the virulence of a reality construction

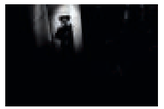
34 The National Security Law regulates a graduated penalization system for delinquency—such as for concrete communist infiltration, involvement in organizations and media of suspected communist leaning, and personally expressing critical opinions—and, for example, provides for long-term imprisonment. While in military dictatorships the death penalty can be imposed, in present-day Korea it still nominally exists but is no longer applied. In the commotion caused by the Korean War, the law led, among other things, to mass executions—but also after the war, under the military governments ruling through 1987, it furnished a legal justification for massacre and torture.

Today there are still a number of prisoners doing time for having violated this law. It has considerable impact on issues of censorship, the ban on unions, and so forth. Of late, public discussion in the sparse but well-networked independent media has resulted in the law no longer being as extensively and indiscriminately deployable as in the past as an instrument for suppression of opinion. Under the liberal administration of ROH Moo-hyun (URI Party, 2003–2008), himself having been an attorney for human rights in the nineteen-eighties, attempts to partially repeal the law failed due to opposition by the right-wing nationalists (Grand National Party).

The presentation of NOH Suntag's photographs in South Korea is not prevented by the law but does frequently require legal support from attorneys. Artist LEE Si-woo, a friend of NOH Suntag's, is currently embroiled in legal proceedings for absurd allegations of military espionage because military facilities are visible in photographs he had taken in a freely accessible area and were exhibited in Japan. Despite numerous acquittals, the prosecutor continues to insist on appealing the lawsuit. The case most famous in Germany for the implementation of the law is that involving philosophy professor SONG Du-yul (Institute for Sociology, Münster), who in 2003 was arrested after decades of exile by the Korean National Intelligence Service upon entering South Korea. The accusation of being a member of the North Korean Communist Party led to a sentence of seven years in prison, which was, in part due to his German citizenship and to the intervention of Amnesty International, served as probation. A harrowing artistic treatment can be found in the video installation "Breakaway, the Century of Sound and Fury" by HONG Sung-dam from 1999 in which the artist processes his torture experiences during his three-year imprisonment (1989–1992).

35 While North Korea's nuclear weapons program has been debated, and close to a million North Koreans are under arms, the desolate condition of the troops and the complete obsolescence of the technical equipment are cause to considerably question the offensive potential of the North. The projection of a war of aggression is nevertheless exploited and extolled due to other tactical deliberations by the U.S. and by right-wing nationalists.

continually inhibiting itself in the ambiguity among the scenarios from the unfinished past of the Korean War and the fictionalization of a future Korea. That this state is by all means politically desired, being that it, for example, serves to create a simple majority in the democratic landscape, is suggested even without awareness of the particular correlations. Yet the idiosyncratic in this situation again becomes plain when, in the last series image [RH III #15], from the depths of a dark room that other from the North again moves into the viewfinder, only to, in turn, peer out of the image through an observation apparatus. Who returns the gaze, we wonder, while

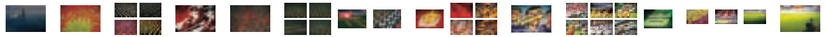



overlooking the fact that we are only being viewed by a museum display. For what we see is the photograph of a photograph from the "peace park" situated along the Demilitarized Zone. "The real correlation of simulation is perhaps the catastrophe," notes Friedrich Kittler.[36] More specific would be to speak of the permanently simulated prognosis of a catastrophe, the hypothetical probability of which would shatter projections for the future just as would the presumption of that which has passed.
The photograph of the photograph follows us from behind along the path to both of the next photo series, "Patriotic Road" and "Red House I. North Korea in North Korea."

Red House I. North Korea in North Korea

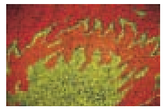
The greatest event staged by the North Korean dictatorship—accessible for Western media and thus widely popular, which in turn pleases KIM Jong-il—is the Arirang Festival. It is held once a year at the May Day Stadium in Pyongyang and was visited by NOH Suntag in 2005 on behalf of a magazine. Synchronized in perfect choreography—in living pictures, mass folklore dances, gymnastic interludes, and military marches—are up to 100,000 extras in a stadium that can hold 150,000 people. Immersed in dramatic lighting and permeated by pathetic music, the "thousands

36 Friedrich Kittler, "Synergie von Mensch und Maschine: Friedrich Kittler im Gespräch mit Florian Rötzer," quoted in "Ästhetik des Immateriellen? Das Verhältnis von Kunst und Neuen Technologien, Teil II," *Kunstforum International* 98 (January–February 1989), p. 109.

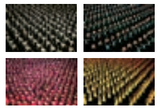


"Red House I. North Korea in North Korea," 2005 [RH I]

of proletarian dictators" are transformed into decals of an ideology that here only has use for the revolutionary masses as interacting pixel units and hues. In this biggest "screen" of the world, mass is not a synonym for normal folk, nor is this a matter of collective experience for the actors, or even the creation of a social network. With the projection of dictator KIM Jong-il one might perhaps suspect the motif of the mass replacing their "'I'-ideal"[37] with him and heroic socialism, consequently indentifying therewith, but on the surface we see only images addressed to mass media. This is a place where staged images are passionately created, aimed at demagogical output, and every camera that records them is coupled with this almightiness. Here "North Korea in North Korea" is fully centered on itself as dominant image constellation. And NOH Suntag? Ultimately, the photographs shown by him in the exhibition were never printed by the mass media. Missing are the wide shots that record the true dimensions of the event. The transfer of the mass "'I'-ideal" to the individual, to a single ideological pattern, appears in NOH Suntag's case almost laconic, like an index of scenes. The monumental production is shown only in detailed sections and equipped with just enough image information to facilitate the interpretation of the symbolic for a certain self-representation and for the act of violence emerging behind such a control of the masses.

In this sense, the first image of the series is both an expression of the parallel existence of precarious everyday life and of a powerful performance with Pyongyang disappearing into the dark, due to insufficient electrical capacities, as soon as the event flares up [RH I #1, #14].

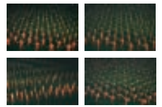


"Pyongyang at Night" is followed by a colorful intoxication of dances, masses of acrobats, and gymnastically bending children and youth

37 Sigmund Freud, *Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse: Die Zukunft einer Illusion* (Frankfurt am Main, 2005), p. 78. See also Sigmund Freud, *Mass Psychology* (London, 2004).

[RH I #64, #36, #93, #13]. The latter are drilled year-round in preparation for the Arirang Festival, for instance by the Mangyongdae Children's Palace, one of the must-see destinations on tours through North Korea.


Homage is paid to the working class in the perpetual struggle against imperialism and exploitation before this collective of the liberated, following commands from the loudspeakers, turns the next page on the book plates held against the torso, positioning for the next scenario of heroic unselfishness [RH I #71, #70].



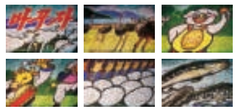
Meanwhile, the mass embodying the bearing support for the eternal president and his son—the military—advances onto the scene with flashing bayonets [RH I #80, #14, #72, #15, #85, #23]. With their masterly Tae Kwon Do exercises, and under the warm-hued spotlights, the fact that the soldiers' growth has been stagnated due to the population's undernourishment, that even young men shorter than 148 centimeters are required to do military service, remains concealed. Despite all physical shrinking, the North Korean population's fighting ability and willingness to sacrifice is impressively displayed to the media representatives—as is the fact that twenty-five percent of the gross domestic product will always be spent on the military, a solidary people's display having gone so far as to sanction the military's right to the harvest before that of the farmers.

"A trapeze artist—as everyone knows, this art, performed high up beneath the domes of the great vaudeville theaters, is one of the most difficult of any attainable by man—had, initially only from a striving for perfection, but later also from a habit that had become tyrannical, so organized his life that … he would remain on his trapeze day and night." This is how Franz Kafka begins his short story "First Sorrow."[38] Like in a grotesque, before the eyes of the world public is, in Pyongyang, a mass marching to their existential obliteration in the image. And the dictatorship's aim is to view the construction of these images from "the domes of the great vaudeville theater stage"—and to promote this point of view to focal perspective. In the May Day Stadium, the camera view overlaps with the "habit turned tyrannical," aligning reality to its "'I'-ideal."

38 Franz Kafka, "First Sorrow," in *Great Stories by Kafka and Rilke*, ed. Stanley Appelbaum (Mineola, NY, 2003), p. 45.

In the following sequence, motifs of heroic history, of recreational activity and basic provisions, are presented.




In all of these pictures of images, hope resonates that the happy child in the inner tube, the cows drumming for their carnal utilization, and the little pigs decorated with service brands all bear back upon reality. The producers of these images, those actually being addressed by the promises inherent therein, comprise the smallest common denominator of the projection—a point in the assertion of a medially and politically self-referential power dispositive. NOH Suntag at no point attempts to act as referent in this intermixture of medium, mass, and power charged with pathos and monumentality. In avoidance of this, his images only show details, which in no instance create a central-perspectival reference between the archetypical architecture of mass control (the stadium), the optical apparatus (the camera), and the totalitarian narrative of self-representation (the dictatorship). Not until we reach the last images in the series [RH I #9, #6, #2, #3] does NOH Suntag zoom back far enough for us to finally stand




behind the central protagonist of all media transmissions from stadiums: the cameraman. Looking beyond him, our gaze rests on the DMZ border guard frozen in the museum display ("North Korea in South Korea") and immediately moves on to a mass assembly in Seoul ("Patriotic Road").

from left: "Patriotic Road," "North Korea in South Korea," "North Korea in North Korea" (montage)

Patriotic Road

At this point the series "Patriotic Road" sets off, with its title already referencing the simultaneity between socialist doctrine in the North and right-wing radical ideologies in the South. The "patriotic road" is an

established expression from the “10-Point Programme of the Great Unity of the Whole Nation for the Reunification of the Country,” proclaimed by KIM Il-sung under the premise of Juche ideology on April 6, 1993.[39] As respects entitling, it soon becomes apparent which

“Patriotic Road,” 2003–2006 [PR]

mirror relationship is inscribed in public space by the actions and mass demonstrations on the part of right-wing nationalists in Seoul. And NOH Suntag goes on to introduce a further significance of heteronomy that is meant to guarantee the construction of one’s own nation against the threat from the North: the U.S. flag [PR #1].

Nevertheless, not a single photograph evinces an American citizen, for this “alien nation” appears in NOH Suntag’s works solely as a symbol—merely as an expression of a protective power vis-à-vis the other “alien nation,” likewise only graspable at its symbolic surface. As such, the small Korean flag almost completely disappears into the “stars and stripes” at the top border of the photograph. The image comprehends the absurdity of only being able to create a draft of the self in contrast to the “other brother” *and* through the neutralizing abrogative character of a foreign power. The addressing of the self to a military protective power as an expression of nationalism sketches identity in a state of a permanent conflict and on the brink of potential military escalation. Therefore it is not surprising that the right-wing mass demonstration of up to 500,000 people was reliant on a martialist military presence.[40]

Ensuing from the images of the masses is a group of former soldiers [PR #2] projected on a canvas, saluting as flat shadows, appearing as a hermetic block averted away from the realistic. In the subsequent sequence of portraits, their self-production moves from the standardized

39 KIM Il-sung, “10-Point Programme of the Great Unity of the Whole Nation for the Reunification of the Country,” April 6, 1993: “10. Those who have contributed to the great unity of the nation and to the cause of national reunification should be honored. Special favors should be granted to those who have performed exploits for the sake of the great unity of the nation and the reunification of the country, to patriotic martyrs and to their descendants. If those who had turned their back on the nation in the past return to the patriotic road, repentant of their past, they should be dealt with leniently and assessed fairly, according to the contribution they have made to the cause of national reunification.”

40 The South Korean Army has been, and still is, at least nominally represented in all territorial wars waged by the United States (e.g., Iraq, Afghanistan, Vietnam). On various banners, visible in the following photographs, right-wing demonstrators can be seen demanding this allegiance.

sunglasses, to the uniform, to posture, to a complete sealing from the outside. The stark triangular composition in which NOH Suntag places one of the military pensioners [PR #7]—from the arrangement of the medals to the two spots of light on the sunglasses—strongly corresponds to the image creation of a mental state anticipating itself in the stereotype of being permanently entrenched in the past.
In mass crowds, the uniformed military appearance is always characterized by a structure of order. It guarantees—similar to the ritualized entanglement of masses, nationalism, and religiosity—a canalization of possible extreme affect which could otherwise easily occur in the anonymity of the masses. Thus, neither do the carefully designed banners and

KIM Jong-il doll prepared for burning seem to be expressions of frenzied mass hysteria, but rather of the well-organized theatrical performance of a long familiar dramaturgy [PR #11–#13]. The climax appears to be predetermined and “escalates” to pompous feigned madness as soon as the cameras have been set up and start to record the arena for the perpetual enemy, who in the form of a doll goes up in flames [PR #14].

NOH Suntag precisely captures, at this ideal point in his image-oriented expression, the moment in which—like a signal for the circle of journalists—the flames in the middle and two young men with wooden slats compositionally round out the space. A spherical logo perfects the scene and prompts this space of controlled expression with the sentence: “Freedom is not free.” No freedom without a fight? Always the same struggle? And for which freedom? The historical manifests only in its potential for the future in the slogans’ pros and cons, which express support for a stronger U.S. military occupation, for sending troops to Iraq, for maintaining the National Security Law, and for increased economic security as well as protest against any rapprochement with the North, against KIM Jong-il, against North Korea’s nuclear weapons program, and against liberal president ROH Moo-hyun. Freedom in this form is a regression, a space lacking perspective. Consequently, it makes sense that another empathetic figure crops up to stimulate greater potency in life: the Protestant Church.[41]

41 Approximately thirty percent of the Korean population is Christian, of which the Catholic population is considered the more liberal of the Christian forms as compared to the Protestants (circa twenty-four percent). Buddhists remain the largest community of faith. Statistical prognoses, however, project that the Protestant Church will achieve dominance in the future. Forty-six percent of the population do not have a religious affiliation.



The Protestant community enters the picture—precisely in character with Christian ecstasy in pragmatic U.S. manner and directly associated with the fundamentalist structures of the Grand National Party[42]—with salvation prayers, praying for the same content for which others burn dolls [PR #5, #15–#18].






"No More Tragedies" divides the policemen accompanying the demonstration without protective shields and helmets and the caricature of KIM Jong-il appearing overpowering due to the out-of-focus image foreground [PR #23]. In the next photograph, a man is sitting alone on the ground as if after a tragic drama, lost and lonely, surrounded exclusively by abstract ornaments of national representation that don't belong to him. Behind the two U.S. flags held in his hands, the tip of the Korean flag is visible. The emphasized symbol emerging from the four elements depicted on this flag represents "earth," which in a figurative sense also stands for devotion. Devotion to whom, and to which social blueprint, and—on this "patriotic road"—to which national construction: these are the questions posed when the self is superimposed with the other as symbol of permanent confrontation. From here the camera alters its position to a bird's-eye view and illustrates the seemingly endless masses of individuals vanishing in this spectacle of ideologies [PR #25, #26].

In the series "Patriotic Road," with its structures of time and plot, NOH Suntag has facilitated the performance of an almost classic drama: from the first image with both flags in pandimensional presence, to the pensioned soldiers moving into the scene, to the stylized climax of the burning, to the religious hysteria solidified in theatrical gestures, all the way to the forlorn and the renewed vanishing of the self in the masses. These are, however, not scenes lasting three hours but rather material trails of light-ray recordings of concrete events over three years, the protagonists of which are revenants in the same story, in a never-ending conflict, making mischief on the other side of the images. And thus does "eternal president"

42 New president LEE Myung-bak of the conservative "Grand National Party" was elected in February 2008 and has been, as a former Hyundai CEO (1965–1992) and avowed Protestant, positioned as a radical conservative. He was elected by eighty percent of South Korean Christians. His former employment at Hyundai clearly points to his political origin as an opportune supporter of the military dictatorships so closely associated with South Korea's large conglomerates. The promise of economic success, in particular, has traditionally been the principal reason for electing a president. Being that in this respect actual growth projections cannot seriously and, most especially, verifiably be confirmed, symbolic acts are required to fill the gap. While serving as mayor of Seoul, LEE Myung-bak had already created an artificial river course through the city. Now he is promising to stimulate the South Korean economy by building a shipping canal from Seoul to Pusan. The project seems downright whimsical for a peninsula surrounded on three sides by water; besides, experts are projecting an economic and ecological disaster. LEE Myung-bak is considered a "hard-liner" in respect to the North and a loyal friend of the United States. For instance, he accomplished the ratification of the controversial U.S.-Korea Free Trade Agreement at the beginning of his term. This has recently been causing tremendous protest by the opposition, since the opening of trade would particularly heighten pressure on already ailing agriculture. Taking a hard line against the North is not openly accepted even by the traditionally conservative conglomerates, for a return to old resentments would meanwhile have fatal economic repercussions. The North itself has already reacted by intensifying the concentration of troops at the DMZ and by sealing off access to industrial regions built with South Korean funds. After the opening phase under the liberal president ROH Moo-hyun, the country is now falling completely back into "Cold War" rhetoric.

KIM Il-sung still, from the grave, call on the "martyrs" to achieve national reunification along the "patriotic road" as if one had to stroll hand in hand with the same ghosts, both in the North and the South, on the road available. Looking back over this space, three scenes have intersected:

from left: "North Korea in North Korea," "State of Emergency," "Patriotic Road" (montage)

Pyongyang in the dark and striving toward the Arirang Festival; the masses disintegrating behind the superimposition of two national symbols; a seemingly filmic scene somewhere in a South Korean agricultural area—in between the symbolic emblem of national representation lies the unspectacular prelude to the series "State of Emergency."

"State of Emergency," 1997–2006 [SoE]

State of Emergency

For NOH Suntag the state of emergency idea was formative in providing both a framework for all series in the exhibition and also the significant titling of the image sequence described in the following. The forty photographs consolidate nine years of images from a most diverse range of South Korean localities, with most of the images having been captured in 2006 in Daechu-ri. Respectively, as it were, NOH Suntag designs a conflict space defining a phenomenon of a duration not chronologically comprehensible and places that cannot be localized to a specific territory.[43] The case of "Daechu-ri 2006," commented upon elsewhere in this catalogue, in this context serves specification purposes, namely the contextualization of delocalized permanence. State of emergency arises here not as a concept temporarily granting authority to the state to suspend all laws were "danger lurking"; instead, the exception itself becomes the rule. During one of the preliminary meetings planning the exhibition, NOH Suntag explicitly made reference to Walter Benjamin's "Fragment VIII" from "On the Concept of History," where it is noted: "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule."[44] In this state of permanent emergency, the executive hour tolls, the

43 This procedure also applies to the other series but is here, due to its relation to the phrase "state of emergency," of particular relevance.
44 Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, vol. 4, 1938–1940*, ed. H. Eiland and M. W. Jennings, trans. E. Jephcott et al. (Cambridge, MA, 2003), p. 392.

power of which is derived from the vagueness, having become the norm, of the situation of fact and of right.[45] NOH Suntag's view is positioned toward the enforcing personnel, entering the scene at this "paradoxical threshold

of indistinction."[46] Similar to a movie set, the headlights of a police car illuminate the deadened street lantern in front of the dim, foggy landscape [SoE #1]. A closed, perspectiveless, bleak, and uneventful space is created, where its artificial staging speaks of bad omens, for we are familiar with the latent horror heralded by such emptied ambience. The next scene shows a lonely, isolated group of South Korean combatpolice[47] in a similarly

horizonless, clammy, snowy landscape, their body language appearing more frosty than menacing [SoE #2]. Only the policeman looking directly into the camera might suggest in this image relation that a confrontation is in the making. Yet the escalation potential as posed by this figure—with his slightly raised shoulders, with the youthful facial expression, its tension stemming more from the cold than from a moment of aggression—appears minimal. But then why this gaze at the center of the image, with which we are also confronted in other photographs, being actually more reminiscent of a casual initiation of contact?

For the long-term establishment of the exception to the rule, a framework is needed that trains, just as penetratingly as permanently, its system of enforcement as absolutely standard. In South Korea, young men are required to do military service for twenty-three to twenty-six months, and this "universal conscription" even applies to the paramilitarily structured police department.

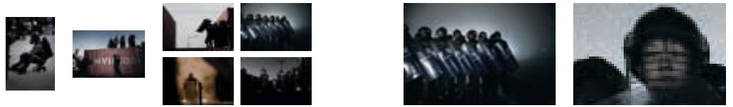
The eye contact captured here by NOH Suntag has recourse to situations in the context of protests where he had met the other in the form of personal acquaintances with an awareness that they were only standing on the "other side," on the executive side, out of a forced sense of duty. This far-reaching phenomenon, signalized at this point, concerns the interconnection between military pressure with a civil slant (police) and the

45 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, CA, 1998). p. 18.
"The situation created in the exception has the peculiar characteristic that it cannot be defined either as a situation of fact or as a situation of right, but instead institutes a paradoxical threshold of indistinction between the two."

46 Ibid.

47 Martial law defines combatants as being part of a combat unit. This translation corresponds to the term "combatpolice," likewise used in the Korean language, and more adequately captures the paramilitary character of this police unit.

respective militarization of large sections of South Korean society.[48] Here the mere existence of the self is completely revoked in the sphere of the political. Its ethnic bonds are dissolved by means of the "emergency state of the nation" put into effect, having long since lost its defining framework.[49] Along the succession of images we continue with the states of emergency, until the other, who could be a friend, becomes paralyzed as a powerful functional unit [SoE #6] with accessories (helmet, gas mask, riot stick, shield)



and merges into a block with the other combatants [SoE #10]. A policeman looks out, again from the image center, from the dramatically condensed, lightly colored photograph with its stagelike, closed, vague space. This time the gaze is veiled by the protective helmet bars and reaches us just at the border of the shield gleaming in the light from the flash. The other now finally stands protected by a power of disposal giving its executive branch the right to exercise violence outside of the confines of the law. The concrete real and, from the perspective of such construed circumstances, the extremely surreal, artificial situation—encompassing the realm of possibility for personal nearness and radically hermetic distance—is already mirrored in this first series sequence by the artistic, scenic character of the photographs.

NOH Suntag follows by introducing moments of timeless and placeless aesthetics. The images appear as eschatological battle scenes, like pathetically

boosted, strictly composed productions. Here the camera view remains fixated on the police units, and only gradually do their "opponents" appear, whose resistance and violence potentials are only, considering the employed

means and quantities, causally integrated into the image [SoE #14, #16]. Into the image aesthetic—picturesquely oscillating between fiction and

48 Next to taxes, education, and labor, military service comprises one of the four civic duties delineated in the constitution. South Korea ranks number nine on the list of worldwide military expenditures. There are a total of 680,000 active soldiers and 1.3 million in the reserve force. During military and police service, draconian penalties are imposed at the merest suspicion of critical utterances against the establishment. This system of control is also in close accordance with the National Security Law and the correspondingly narrow interpretation of this law as concerns transgressions occurring during military service.

49 Here I am referring to the interaction—already apparent in the other series—between the individual "national" in a permanently mirrored relationship with the protective power USA and the unidentified eternal enemy in the other half of one's "own nation."

document, between concrete potential for violence and mythical imagination—a hinged image slips [SoE #20], initiating a change in perspective from that "monopolized by the executive" to the "illegality of the permanent state of emergency." It announces the shift in focus, contrasting a black block of uniforms with a woman in everyday clothing. In the cool hue of a





naturalistically reproduced hand, resting on an umbrella, the existential bareness of civilian life is displayed. The spine of this figure asserts itself by turning away from the protective shield pressed into her back. She is in the right. She is representative of a civilian society whose slogan—as we know from the photo series "Black Hook Down"—is the futureless prophesy "Till the Last Breath." We are back in Daechu-ri (village of great harvest), the rurally characterized region of Pyeongtaek. This is the location of the U.S. military base Camp Humphreys, which in turn was constructed near a former Japanese Air Force base. After the Korean War, the U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) was granted, as part of the Korea-U.S. Mutual Defense Treaty, extensive rights[50] for dispossession of lands to create military bases for the protection of the territorial integrity of the South, in particular view of the enemy to the North. Since the start of the new millennium, the global presence of the U.S. military has been newly organized under the key term "strategic flexibilization," with South Korea, as the U.S. "vestibule" in South Asia, playing a central role in this respect.

Hence, the status quo of the United States as protective power is no longer legally valid, for the structural realignment cannot be unequivocally territorially determined. In order to nevertheless carry out, in a semi-legal manner, the land dispossession necessary to make room for the higher concentration of troops, the Land Partnership Plan (LPP) was founded in conjunction with the South Korean government designating the exchange of land tracts near former U.S. military areas with new land. In the region surrounding Daechu-ri, the consequence has been the expansion of Camp Humphreys, annexing up to twenty-seven square kilometers of land, causing 1,372 farmers to lose their land and livelihood. NOH Suntag's photographs from the year 2006 illustrate the escalation of the Daechu-ri situation and at the same emphasize the big picture, forming the basis for this national state of emergency: the arbitrary abrogation of civilian law governing property on the basis of the disavowed nation state South Korea,

50 The civil legal systems of national states hosting U.S. military bases have no rights whatsoever for interrogating or prosecuting U.S. military service members for offenses against the civilian population. Such cases are under the exclusive legal jurisdiction of the U.S. military. This led to massive protests when it was leaked that multiple crimes against the Korean population (rape, murder, accidents involving military vehicles, etc.) had been committed and is, along with the entanglement of the U.S. military with military dictatorship crimes, one of the reasons for widespread anti-American sentiment in South Korea.

whose legislative process is countermanded by another nation's global projection, in order to direct its executive process with highly visible brutality inwards [SoE #25]. The evidence of violence imparts two signals: loyal solidarity to the outside (the U.S.) from the inside, and well-fortified


steadfastness on the border in the middle of the Korean Peninsula. The latter is of consequence since any opposition may be attributed to communist infiltration, which had been successfully staved off at the 38th parallel. In the next series sequence, executive personnel enters the scene in its





typical gradation: from civilian police to the KCIA[51] to civilian security services that, hired by the state, are in a position to exert pressure on the landholders irrespective of any legal framework [SoE #29–#37]. In the background, in front of the newly implemented U.S. territory, the last phalanx is formed by the Korean military, ready to observe the conflict while never intending to directly intervene.



The images resemble familiar camera settings from Hollywood's dream factory, reminiscent of their dramas processing military trauma. One of the photos [SoE #38] appears to be referencing the film *Apocalypse Now*.[52] However, it shows real Korean soldiers against stark backlight with battle helicopters rising in the background. These exist in the here and now and not in a fictional, post-traumatic processing of a guilt they couldn't achieve.

51 The roots of the Korean National Intelligence Service (NIS)—officially established in 1961 as the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA) and later temporarily renamed to Agency for National Security Planning (ANSP)—can be traced back to the Korean Counterintelligence Corps (KCIC), founded between 1945 and 1948 by the U.S. Counter Intelligence Corps (CIC). The structure of the agency is essentially in line with the intelligence services already implemented during Japanese occupation.
52 *Apocalypse Now*, Director: Francis Ford Coppola, USA 1979.

The question of guilt has no place here, since the permanent state of emergency fabricates the conditions of the factual that are in turn not preserved in the individual. At the end of the series, the conflict quiets down,

and a well-ordered harmony arises with an image showing the dome of the Korean National Assembly meeting its equivalent in the helmet of the policeman, with both merging into a successful, formal whole [SoE #42]. The "facts" of the series "State of Emergency"—appearing clearly staged—present a hegemonic system that can only be taken into consideration in view of the entanglement with fictional, dramatic narrative structures. Understanding the state of permanent emergency as a moment in the arty construction of a powerful but impossibly absolute law is the image proposal staged here by NOH Suntag. Perhaps life first asserts in this distanced view its bare existence beyond empty formulas of national sovereignty which sublate its existence as internal negation. A substantiation of the conflict sovereignty with a claim to "reality" and the constraints of the factual can no longer succeed in the face of these images. Rather, in the images a psychogram appears tattooed on the back which one cannot turn around to see.

Looking past the corner of the wall at the end of the series "State of Emergency," our gaze again crosses that of the North Korean security guard with his surveillance apparatus, who continues staring through the room from the eternally guaranteed museum display.

Forgetting Machine 1/2

On the furthest wall in the exhibition space, NOH Suntag placed a small selection from the photo series "Forgetting Machine 1/2."[53] Temporally set outside the topicality of the other thematic blocks, an unfinished story crosses us, effecting the present yet today as a gap from a past reality. When South Korean military dictator PARK Chung-hee was shot by his

53 The entire series is comprised of around seventy-two images, only twelve of which were on display at the Württembergischer Kunstverein.

"Forgetting Machine 1/2", 2006–2007 [FM]

chief of intelligence KIM Jae-gyu on October 26, 1979, hopes of reforms following eighteen years of military junta burgeoned.[54] Large sections of the population, particularly students supporting the democracy movement, hit the streets to lend expression to their demand for liberal national structures. Barely six months later, the next military regime had been installed with the state of emergency having been proclaimed. In Gwangju, a traditional stronghold of resistance against the dictatorship, the university was closed down. Protests by students and civilians ensued, with the local police force responding by using loaded weapons. The insurgents consequently stormed the police station and armed themselves as well. After the U.S. military had signalized that they would tolerate the massive deployment of the Korean Army against the local civilian population, a ring was spanned around Gwangju, almost immediately squelching any resistance.[55] The Gwangju massacre wasn't digested until the early nineteen-nineties. There are publications, photo books, and meanwhile a theatrical- and pathetic-looking monument serving as reminders of the victims. But how should the memories be expressed, with which ideological patterns? Was not the severing of the resistance an act of self-defense to stabilize a nation that would have otherwise been in danger of "defenselessly" being at the mercy of the North? Are the deceased not actually victims of the communist infiltration? It is this shifting of the crime—onto an anonymous, imaginary third party along with the indirect legitimization by a "protective power," that invisible "untarnished" accomplice—which remains ingrained in memory.[56] This aimless addressing of the crime is "… the [exact] reverse of the proper funeral rite … the latter implies [by definition] a certain reconciliation, an acceptance of loss …"—and also of one's own guilt. "… [T]he return of the dead signifies that they cannot find their proper place in the text of tradition … The shadows of their victims will continue to chase us as 'living dead' until we give them a decent burial, until we integrate the trauma of their death into our historical memory."[57]
In the series "Forgetting Machine 2," NOH Suntag visits not the powerful symbols of the representation of a repressed guilt (the new monumental commemoration cemetery) but instead follows the spaces of history in the expression of a void, bearing the suspicion of an invisible presence of

54 Military dictator (1961–1979) PARK Chung-hee remains, for many Koreans, the great renewer of the country. Korea's economic upswing along with the build-up and rearmament of the army took place during his administration. Funding of the economic upswing was achieved by several *chaebols* (conglomerates), which received loans from the government or federal support for international loans that were in turn repositioned in the government-controlled banking system, with exporting in particular being substantially augmented by this system. In 1972, PARK Chung-hee declared emergency law and implemented the Yushin Constitution, conclusively abolishing any residual fragments of democratic policy. The strict implementation of the National Security Law was carried out by an army of intelligence agency personnel. Means of controlling the birth rate included cases of forced sterilization. Critics of the establishment were imprisoned, tortured, and deported. South Korea participated in the Vietnam War with 30,000 soldiers. The fact that relatively few executions can be attributed to PARK Chung-hee is mostly due to the "cleansing campaigns" of his predecessors and the related flight of population sections critical of the establishment to the North or to Western neighbors.
55 According to official counts, the Gwangju massacre cost 207 lives, with around 1,000 seriously injured. Aid organizations estimate at least 1,000 dead and 15,000 injured.
56 These are questions still posed by sections of the population and extended by right-wing nationalistic policy.
57 Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA, 1991), p. 23.

perpetrators and victims, such as the former administration building for the regional government. The “shadows of the victims” are those arising in the portrait series “Forgetting Machine 1.” Here the faces of the victims are portrayed in the state of their decomposed disappearance, evoked like ghosts engraved in the natural process of decay—ghosts that would even continue to haunt if they had been completely transformed to particles, to ash [FM 1 #15]. Developing here is not an image of reconciliation, for

the veiled gaze of the disappearing victims postulates a boundary that mirrors nothing other than the gaze of the perpetrator, who in its projection onto another isn’t aware of its victims. Yet the undeniable facts—that there was a corpse, that a murder was committed, and that the perpetrator, who cannot be a projection, did take action—were noted down under

the images in the form of a medical report: “AHN Byoungbok, November 17, 1960 to May 21, 1980, shattered skull, amputation of upper extremities.” Inscribed in this facticity is the escalation potential dormant in a permanent exception to the rule that creates a comprehensive cloaking of reality and effectually causes the total disintegration of the perception of the opposite party as an equal.

Media

NOH Suntag situated the series “Forgetting Machine 1/2” at the temporary end of the exhibition, but then he, with the last six images, once again referred back to the individual scope of agency in photographing. In the series “Media,” situations from “State of Emergency,” in particular, are made

“Media,” 2004–2007 [M]

visible as attractive scenarios for mass-media application contexts. Moreover, evident here is the interlacing of media-based recording using

instruments of surveillance when the image of a photographer from the Korean Intelligence Agency (KCIA) appears in the series of “colleague portraits” [M #2]. At the end of the exhibition, NOH Suntag again fields

the question—in directing the lens to his equals—as to whether “the camera” might not be “the antidote and the disease, a means of appropriating reality and a means of making it obsolete.”[58] This quotation from Susan Sonntag describes the skeptical stance that NOH Suntag navigates in this field, permeated with doubts, of media-related “reality representation.” In each of the series discussed here, the position of the medium and of its user have been evident: from the interlaced observation apparatuses in “Black Hook Down,” to the look relations[59] shifted to the image center, the consciously set progressions and fractures within the image sequences, where reality is depicted as an inconsistent interlinking between situations, to the fiction-like productions of the documents permanently noting, as an asynchronous narrative, the incongruence of image and reality. In this structure of critical reflection, mirrored on all levels of NOH Suntag’s works—the locality, the occasion, the focusing of the apparatus, the photographing moment, the detail selection, the image archive, the captions, the image combination, the exhibition, the written commentary—he attains a distance that makes the photographic image available again as political instrument in the “investiture of the real.”[60] The photographic images’ inherent “material realities in their own right” and “richly informative deposits” reference, at every spot, at every level of the selected means, the shadows of reality[61] beyond the image.

Epilogue

Respecting the essays in his work, Walter Benjamin writes: “Their common programmatic aim is to further the integration process of *Wissenschaft* … through an analysis of the work of art which recognizes in it an integral expression—territorially limiting to no side—of the religious, metaphysical, political, [and] economic trends of an epoch.”[62] Others see the essays as resembling a journalistic text form aligned with the contemporary. Topicality and the knowledge about an epoch are mutually exclusive, if merely due to the lack of temporal distance. Yet this essay explores an art

58 Susan Sonntag, “The Image-World,” in *On Photography* (New York, 2001), p. 179.
59 See Victor Burgin, “Looking at Photographs,” in *The Photography Reader*, ed. Liz Wells (London, 2003), p. 134. Victor Burgin summarizes the look reactions implied here as follows: “. . . the look of the camera as it photographs the ‘pro-photographic’ event; the look of the viewer as he or she looks at the photograph; the ‘intra-diegetic’ looks exchanged between people (actors) depicted in the photograph (and/or looks from actors towards objects); and the look the actor may direct to the camera.”
60 Ibid, p. 133.
61 Sonntag 2001 (see note 58), p. 180: “But the force of photographic images comes from their being material realities in their own right, richly informative deposits left in the wake of whatever emitted them, potent means for turning the tables on reality—for turning it into a shadow. Images are more real than anyone could have supposed.”
62 Walter Benjamin, “Lebenslauf III” (1928), in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 6, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main, 1999), pp. 218–19. See also Walter Benjamin, “Curriculum Vitae (III),” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, vol. 2, 1927–1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA, 1999).

happening in the present. Its presence-now turns the analytical equipment that can be applied to this art into media of limited application, since as regards the presence-now of the artwork it can only act as obsolete equipment and hence hardly come to terms with it. Advisable here, then, is to be "territorially limiting to no side," which simultaneously implies an acceptance of vagueness and speculation. Interpreting the term "territorial" not in reference to various disciplines but rather in the sense of territory leads to a further dilemma. Being addressed here is a Korean artist conveying to us his perspective on conflicts, the contexts of which, from the perspective of this essay's author, are anchored in a cultural, social, economic, political, and societal reality divergent from our own.

The act of speaking about a context where detailed differentiations transpire in another language, in another locality, can ultimately only lead to the absorption of the "foreign" into the self. This circumstance has repeatedly elicited irritation for the author of this essay, for example as regards the tendency to transfer *realpolitik* conditions. Are not the *chaebols* having emerged from the Japanese occupation exactly the same as the German conglomerates having arisen from the Third Reich? Wasn't the persecution of communists during the ban on the Communist Party of Germany (KPD), having led to the imprisonment of circa 40,000 people including resistance fighters against the Nazis, the same as the persecution of the communists in South Korea? Isn't the lackey stance toward the United States likewise comparable? Wasn't in this respect, too, freedom of opinion curtailed by the new emergency law, the "acquittal of radicals," and employment bans? Doesn't the corruption scandal at Samsung correlate to that of Siemens? And what is so special about South Korea's newly elected president LEE Myung-bak having served as an executive at Hyundai from 1965 to 1992 when a former Federal Chancellor has been willing to procure lucrative auxiliary income from a former KGB boss? Everything the same!? One could probably endlessly carry on with a jargon of polemics and of ideological simplification, contriving an entire system of global equipollencies. Speaking as such ultimately engenders the complete leveling of the other with the self and would prove futile. With NOH Suntag citing an author from our cultural history as a point of departure for the exhibition, a proposal to discuss the other from the perspective of the self is offered. He prefaced deliberation on the exhibition with a quotation by Walter Benjamin: "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule."[63] The state of emergency has been legally anchored in nearly all governmental forms worldwide and is considered a projection surface of political legitimization for the

63 Benjamin 2003 (see note 44).

encroachment of government bodies upon all areas of public life in a nation. That the elevation of the state of emergency to global standard accompanied the successive decoupling of legal space from the framework "nation" was paradoxically illustrated by the monocausal, temporary hegemony of a nation, the United States of America, following September 11, 2001. The process of coping with the state of emergency on the inside was entirely projected onto the global, intangible outside, with the democratic state of the nation on the inside being hollowed out first. Perhaps the figure of the state of emergency, as presented to us by NOH Suntag, reveals a way of speaking about the Korean case that critically and productively keeps open reflection on, along with differences to, one's own context.

Interview:
Nathalie Boseul SHIN
Spoke with NOH Suntag

Nathalie Boseul SHIN
NOH Suntag, your photographic work appears to be strongly connected to your private history and to the political reality of Korean society. You studied political science before turning to the medium photography. What are the specific political contexts that have influenced you?

NOH Suntag
In the first half of the nineteen-nineties, during my college years, South Korea was in transition from military dictatorship to democracy. A common folk saying is: “Directly before daybreak it is the darkest.” At this time, the still-active military dictatorship protagonists desperately wanted to uphold their mere existence with a reign of terror. I can remember how back then president ROH Tae-woo announced a “war against crime,” and anyone who was against the policy of the regime was considered a criminal. Acting outside of the normal social safety net was even sufficient cause to become an object of suspicion. Corruption and organized crime, by contrast, were tolerated. A battle was waged against every form of resistance as if one were trying to execute a military operation. Yet this didn’t prevent substantial public resistance. In this phase, numerous friends in my vicinity were arrested or wounded. Many students and members of the labor movement and of the people’s movement lost their lives. In May 1991, a student my age was beaten to death by police officers who were supposed to be preventing a demonstration. Furthermore, it was the year in which several young insurgents publically burned themselves. The regime and the government-aligned press depicted the self-burnings as having been influenced by “dark powers.” They didn’t hesitate to misrepresent the truth, claiming that these suicides had been ordered by North Korean dictator KIM Jong-il himself. Wherever possible, the government had the dead bodies simply disappear. What is more, citizens were regularly arrested for distributing or for even possessing dissident writings.
In line with current affairs, particularly with the upcoming elections, the government postponed making sensational revelations about espionage attacks from the North—a traditional practice already employed by military dictatorships from the nineteen-sixties to eighties and aimed at arousing in the voters a feeling of permanent crisis.
This concentration of, rationally speaking, absolutely unacceptable events triggered doubts and questions in me: What things are emerging in our society, and why are they developing in such a way? What is truth and what is falsehood? Why don’t we learn anything about progressive political models in academic contexts? Why is the realization of a better society forbidden? What I saw was also seen by others. What I heard was also heard by others. Reflection on writing and photography originated in this process of doubt, and in the awareness of there being others who must be experiencing something similar.

What was the most important inner conflict that your generation experienced at the beginning of the nineteen-nineties? Did you have something like a vision of a “new Korea”?

Back then, recent history of the period following the Korean War was basically taboo for students. Curiosity and exploration of the society in which we at that time lived were not permitted. The fact that numerous books covering contemporary history had been banned illustrates, in a paradoxical way, the crisis situation of the former regime at that time.
As a joint research paper, several university professors published a book entitled *Understanding Korean Society,* the detrimental consequence of which entailed their being brought to trial for violation of the National Security Law. During this period, society was dominated by the insurmountable conflict between the reality of the reign of terror and the yearning for democracy. The underlying resistance was focused on the suppression of knowledge and speech. Prevailing was an awareness of the absolute necessity to restore rational thought in the face of the arbitrariness of violence. A kind of superior sense of duty existed to create, now and immediately, a better society as opposed to only discussing its possibility or impossibility. The most urgent challenge seemed to be the elimination of the regime resting on old military dictatorship structures.
But there wasn’t only resistance. In a society where extreme hate and dread form the livelihood of political power, people willingly adapt to the regime’s rules of conduct. Opportunism and conformity, especially of the politically “attuned” press and of many intellectuals, were the most significant obstacles on the path to democracy.
Nowadays, the long shadow of the military dictatorships seems to be fading, and the step-by-step implementation of democracy is nearly complete. The extreme and irrational confrontational consciousness toward North Korea has nevertheless not abated. The political, economic, and military dependence on the USA further intensifies this conflict situation. Simultaneously, the same generation that had laid the cornerstone for the social revolution on the path to democracy is now the cause of widespread distrust of politics. It is disturbing to watch how this generation, since it has become involved in *realpolitik*, has sustained its position through amalgamation, self-delusion, treachery, and dogmatism—independent of progressive or conservative bias.

It is common knowledge that South Korea and North Korea have developed two totally opposite systems and ideologies. Since recently, South Koreans have been allowed to travel to North Korea, but a seemingly insurmountable distance nonetheless remains between the two countries. In your work, you less frequently address the differences but rather instead focus on the apparent similarities between the two systems. “Red House II. Give and Take” and “Red House III. North Korea in South Korea” could be cited here as examples. The photographs give the impression that a network of associations has developed between South Korea and North Korea despite established differences. To what would you attribute this really quite unusual perspective?

I consider neither North Korea nor South Korea to be the ideal society. I have expressed my critical stance on both societal systems indirectly and occasionally also very directly. Since I was born and grew up in South Korea, it is of course easier due to my background to observe the microstructures of this relationship from the vantage point of the South. The two countries demonstrate their greatest similarity in their respective idealization of the self and demonization of the other. Furthermore, the social modes of operation are increasingly similar in that how to use the threat of the “eternal enemy” to facilitate the interior regime-loyal allegiance of the population is perfectly understood. The equation “criticism of the government = friendly attitude toward North Korea” has long prevailed in South Korean society. The other variable in this simple equation exists in the version: “criticism of North Korean society = against reunification, pro USA.” The tenacity with which it is asserted that self-criticism of one’s own society is nothing more than a glorification of North Korea, however, conceals a grave problem: here history is unreflectedly perpetuated in the present as system-immanent violence potential. In all societal realms a risk potential has become ingrained, simultaneously pervading all medial and virtual scopes of everyday life. This is founded on the images already having been developed in the military dictatorships, where the North was literally portrayed in the guise of the devil. As a young man serving in the military, I had to point my rifle toward North Korea. Even after I had completed my military service and returned to society, I remained a member of the army reserves and the militia, being drilled once or twice a year in military discipline and anti-communist education. This procedure is a legally mandatory duty that every normal man in Korea must fulfill. Yet the standard “friend or enemy of North Korea” extends considerably further into the microstructures of all daily activities, from pedagogical questions, to the career at the workplace, to problems in primary health care. In the political realm, this narrow perspective has influenced compliance with human rights or international trade agreements, et cetera. North Korea has been successively transformed—irrespective of its real existence—to an utterly symbolic existence. This absolutization, with North Korea only appearing as an uncanny monster, directly sparks the question: Is this image true or a lie? And doesn’t the exclusiveness of this construction make us, too, monsters? I question the only permissible logic dictating that all those “good” must be against North Korea and all those “bad” for North Korea.
Last year I published a book by the name of *Red House* in English, though *Red Frame* in Korean. In South Korea, North Korea is criticized for being a society encased in “a red frame.” I wanted to suggest a change in perspective and adopted the image of “the red frame” to represent the condition of South Korean reality, ultimately establishing, in the pattern of omnipresent transposing efforts, a similar situation of being imprisoned. In this context, I phrased my work approach in aphorisms: “Before you pick up binoculars, first look into the mirror”; “Before you touch a microscope, first look into the mirror”; and “I am your mirror. You are my mirror. This I do not deny.”

Why did you select “photography as art” as aesthetic form of political commentary and not the classical form of journalistic documentary reportage?

The expression “photography as art” is slightly perplexing. There are many different analytical approaches for coming to terms with art. In my opinion, no fixed categories exist in art. One thinks something can certainly not be art, but it becomes art. Isn’t this the way art actually works? Aside from the question of the category “art,” I am interested in expanding perception of reality through an expansion of the visual, and to accomplish this I use an optical-technical medium: photography.
Having worked in journalism, both in writing and photographing, has always proved quite useful for more deep-reaching future reflection on the function of images. Reference to journalistic virtues such as truth and objectivity, being unattainable virtues, has specifically rendered the question of necessary traversal of boundaries in artistic images. This questioning has nurtured doubt and engendered a constant tug-of-war between optimizing the image with even more factual information and demanding, through conscious transposition, interpretation by the viewer. In any case, the boundaries between both areas became clear to me at that time. This resulted in a process of playing around, touching upon, and extending beyond these borders.

The experiences you have gained—from activism to political science to photojournalism—have influenced your doubts both regarding various political campaigns as well as any possibility of adequately reporting thereupon using the medium of documentary photography. How has your “role model” changed? How do you view photography as a medium in this landscape?

Like many others, I started out with the simple and naïve hope of being able to use the means of the photographic document and of verbal commentary to critically and clearly report on social conditions in South Korea. And it was simply a fact that ignoring violence and death was equated with acquiescence to this situation. The naïveté lay in my hope of being able to end the dirty violence of the mighty using the means at my disposal. To me it seemed inevitably necessary to “look the violence directly in the eye” and to bring forth conclusive observations in the form of images that would become imprinted on the consciousness and memory of society. The photographic representation of violence was at the same time intended to open new scopes of possibility and to fuel hope. It wasn’t until later that self-critical awareness indicated that a violent quality is inherent in the medium “photography,” even as a form of the material reverberation of reality.

As relates to the realms of possibility and to hope, which are meant to appear in the image, it seems to me that your work standpoint has fundamentally changed. In your earlier works, the aspect of identifying and “denouncing” crime scene and perpetrator were distinctly manifested. Your more recent works

This is true. I tend to be more reticent about firm convictions. Yes, one could even almost say that my sometimes blind convictions had stirred a feeling of shame. While this absolutization had the positive effect that I could back then more aptly capture certain contexts, it also led to me having simply ignored false assumptions. My own rigidification incited a dread of lapsing into extremism and ruling out errors. This development

are considerably more restrained. The photographs of both left- and right-wing demonstrators and the change in perspective between South Korea and North Korea don’t really appear to be observed from a fixed standpoint. It seems as if you would pose question after question, only to retract them in the same moment. Is this impression accurate, and—if so—what has changed?

In your photographs, text plays an important role. You use captions to comment on image content, or you record work processes in work diaries. What significance and importance does text hold in your photographic work?

ultimately moved toward patterns evoking structurally similar general polarizations, or monsters, as had been so effectively employed in politics. The willingness to impose one’s own conviction onto others is a pivotal determinant of violence, to which I after all felt a vehement aversion.
On the other hand, “skeptics” and “disbelievers” are not sincerely welcomed in any realm of society, and the stigma of “opportunists” was and still is a flagrant affront. In the end, the only criteria remaining to hinder a further escalation of the situation are freedom, assurance, and the diffusion of doubt.
Karl Marx viewed the revolution as a “barraging locomotive.” In contrast, Walter Benjamin compared it to an “emergency brake.” This inconsistency was something like a motif prompting me to fundamentally reassess and reframe my work approach. I am now interested in presenting scenes that illustrate my disconcertment, that facilitate a secret view of the work process of photographing, or that contain the figure of the viewer. Should an occasion for doubt arise, it results in the opportunity to initiate a dialogue. Perhaps this is the artistic scope of agency that Bertolt Brecht intended to incite with the “alienation effect” technique.

Before I started photographing, I actually did write first. I made a living for myself by writing. Therefore it stands to reason that I started out with a very positive view of the relationship between text and image. As a matter of fact, in the beginning I was not happy with my work being able to be viewed only visually. Text took on the role of “instruction” on how to interpret the image. Other text figures were written like “black comedies,” commenting on social conditions through scenic descriptions. There was something like distress that my content wouldn’t be correctly identified, and I wanted to control how it was understood. The results were, however, occasionally laughably banal.
I then continued with the connection between image and text, but using other methods. For example, I developed a hundred-page dossier with work notes on the photo series “The Strange Ball” and displayed it in the space with the photos. A not clearly definable context developed on the image level that was linked with concrete events on the language level. The series “Red House” was, in turn, accompanied by aphorisms, or texts resembling proverbs, which thematized my mindset as photographer but also possible viewer mindsets in a rather open, poetical form. Methodical access to the relationship between image and text is still unclear to me. Yet at the same time, the relation between both of these mediums remains important.

Your photographs are usually taken in black-and-white. Do you use the "mythical aura" inherent in black-and-white photography which promises to more closely proximate reality than color photography?

In the history of visual arts, the history of photography is very short. During this short period of time, black-and-white photography has played a central role and is most definitely related to the myth that you cited. Yet black-and-white photography is accused of being old-fashioned, or serving nostalgic glorification. In my case, the question can be answered in a relatively unspectacular way. It was merely the first technical method to which I became accustomed, offering at the same time easier access to that which I wanted to show than did color photography. When I photograph, it is impossible for me to control time, space, and light. Color in the image generates additional information that cannot be definitively identified in such an open situation and therefore could, in the end result, be of disadvantage to that which had first been perceived through the viewfinder. Yet ultimately this "initial habit" does not set a standard for a particular artistic strategy. Meanwhile, I decide according to situation whether to work with black-and-white or color photography.

In regard to artistically composed documentary photography, artists like Ansel Adams, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Walker Evans, and David Goldblatt are of central import. Have you been influenced by these artists? If you were to name one person of particular influence to you, who would it be?

Though I am familiar with the works of the artists mentioned, I can't definitively say if and to what extent they have actually influenced me. In fact, views like those of Bertolt Brecht and John Heartfield occupied me during my college years. I may not know everything about them, but they were important to me as artists of plays on both words and images and, at the same time, elicited "a bittersweet smile" in me.
Like most photographers, in the beginning I, too, could relate to the romantic humanism in documentary photographs. Other Korean photographers operated in a similar framework. But very early on the method of denunciation, of clear instruction and enlightenment, appeared dubious to me. A further problem lay in the fact that the purported objectivity was both instrumentalizable and adaptable for mutually exclusive application purposes, for example for appropriation through public enlightenment programs. It would be presumptuous to claim to have hereby developed a methodical model that is immune to such misappropriation, but the permanent reflection and conscious acceptance of these borderlines plays a visible and focal role in my work, and this also highlights the point where it varies from classical documentary photography.

"Optical apparatuses," cameras, binoculars, microscopes, or stages appear in your photographs. Which role do these play in the image?

I am curious about the meaning of the things that I view. John Berger's *About Looking* and *Ways of Seeing* have given me a lot to think about. That a method can be inherent in the behavior of the viewer, or even a meaning in the behavior of the viewer, rang true to me, like a great echo. The history of mankind is a history of visual expansion, and if you consider that this is

related to the expansion of power, then the optical mechanism itself really is something of great interest. Cameras, binoculars, and microscopes are instruments representative of visual expansion, but they are mostly trained on others. Collecting visual information about others is a product of a desire to master others, underlying the will to master, as can hardly be denied. Although the optical instruments aimed at each other in South Korea and North Korea also serve to facilitate rapprochement, exchange, travel, remembrance, reappearance, and plain curiosity, they cannot completely hide the fundamental desire to exert power. Problems of visual degeneration arising from such optical instruments must also be taken into consideration. "Everything about North Korea with the latest stereoscopy technique" can be read above the apparatuses in one of my photographs taken at one of the unification observatories. This linguistic exaggeration at the same time points to the visual destitution and the diminished awareness with which images of North Korea are viewed here. When I am holding an optical instrument with limited lens coverage in my hand for a while, I am directly preoccupied with the question of whether it is actually possible to claim that "I have seen North Korea" or that "specifically this is North Korea" or, even more fundamentally, of why we cling to this observation of North Korea.

The series "Red House II. Give and Take" begins with the image of a soldier looking over his shoulder into the camera. At the end of the series "Red House III. North Korea in South Korea," a North Korean border guard looks toward the South across the Demilitarized Zone with binoculars. In the former, there is a comprehensive sequence where fellow travelers are captured in the act of photographing. What do these motifs mean to you? Which point captures this merging of optical apparatus and its users as conveyed in the image?

In "Red House II," I showed the space North Korea and also captured the people exploring this space, either with the same or with another intention. In South Korea today, cameras seem to serve as proof of identity, documenting that a person is part of society. The fact that one hundred strangers visiting North Korea own more than one hundred cameras makes the prediction probable that their main activity in North Korean space will be taking photographs. Each individual's camera is pointed at objects for different reasons—memories, understanding, experience, observation, and information collection—and then the shutter button is pressed. This seems to be a sort of holy ritual or a group dance. Even the North Koreans take part in this ritual. From time to time, cameras function as a bridge between people wanting to share a feeling of friendship and remembrance. When this happens, one is more than happy to assist someone as a photographer. If the trip to North Korea could be arbitrarily repeated, one would have no problem postponing this ritual, but a visit to North Korea will be a continual reminder that this could be one's last visit to the country. The "ritual of photographing" thereby becomes a nondeferrable duty. After having barely set one's foot in the forbidden land, every visitor feels obliged to partake in this ritual as "last" witness. One would almost have to be ashamed for not bringing along a camera to this place.

In “Red House II,” I wanted to concurrently superimpose in detail the unknown space North Korea with the behavior of those having penetrated this space. One can merely speculate as to how the scenes look that are captured in the camera of each individual, what they have in common, how they will be disseminated, and in which respect they will become mementos. But it is probable that all will think: “What I photographed is true.” My photographs are a minor attack on this surety: “Maybe that is not how it was. I wonder whether it wasn’t perhaps an absurd activity in which I participated in excess.”

In the series “Give and Take,” there is an image pair portraying the crater lake Chonji at Baekdu-san Mountain and the statue of KIM Il-sung adjacent to one another. Both photographs treat, for one, the sublime pathos of a landscape, and also the representation of political power. At the same time, multiple creations of legends, carrying great significance in South Korean and North Korean societies, are superimposed in both motifs. Which motifs are of central importance here, and why are they entwined in this form?

The crater lake Chonji at Baekdu-san Mountain is revered as a holy place in North Korea, symbolizing the fight against Japanese occupation. In South Korea, the same location is associated with the historical myth of the Korean people. The first verse of the South Korean national anthem directly references this myth. This is why photographs of Baekdu-san can be found throughout South Korea. Pictures of this landscape are hanging in offices of politicians and businesspeople, just as in restaurants, beauty salons, schools, or administrative offices. Their existence is considered to be totally unrelated to political usage in North Korea.
In North Korea, Baekdu-san has, in particular, a direct relationship to legend creation involving KIM Il-sung, whose son KIM Jong-il was supposedly born here; and the “eternal president” waged his battle against the Japanese from here. For this reason, the territory is a holy area for the North that is purportedly pervaded with the “spiritual power of the great leader.” At high-level diplomatic visits, it is customary to have souvenir photos taken with KIM Il-sung (deceased 1994) and KIM Jong-il against this backdrop. Interesting to me is the fact that one and same geographic area is symbolically marked with images and instrumentalized by members of respectively different political systems for seemingly opposite motives.
When South Koreans view the image of the mountain, they sense the healing power of the people. When they are presented with the same scene fronted by the monument of KIM Il-sung, they are startled.
On the Korean Peninsula, a political longing for power appears to be at the root of the longing for Baekdu-san. For me the question begs to be answered as to whether the harsh attacks on KIM Il-sung harbor the wish to sit, in his stead, on the “throne of power” in front of Baekdu-san.

Much of your photography appears extremely staged. Although you always record concrete events, some photos are reminiscent of pictorial, dramatic battle

How scenes change from fatal political reality to reappear as dramatically staged images is something I have spent much time contemplating. First of all, it requires constant moral introspection. In addition, such

images, lightly colored baroque figure compositions, or theatrical scenes of religious ecstasy. They appear construed and create a distance that is very disconcerting in relation to the real events. The first scene of the series “State of Emergency” looks like a still from a movie. Other images could be associated with fashion photographs. This multilayered, aesthetic superimposition seems to be perpetually stepping in front of the image content, as if it were intending to delay direct access thereto. Which methodical and content-related interest is behind these image strategies and citations of image aesthetics?

The exhibition *State of Emergency* shows a new constellation of selected photographs taken by you over the past nine years. The selection is based on your image archive where the images are sorted in series. For the exhibition you have reconfigured these series and altered the existing thematic contexts. The series “Pictorial Riot Police” was modified and exhibited under the title “State of Emergency,” also the title for the entire exhibition. What motivated this procedural openness? According to which criteria do you recompile your works? Which considerations led to the title of the exhibition?

productions harbor the risk of stylistic arbitrariness. Yet this image aesthetic is causally based on an entirely personal irritation. In observing conflicts played out publically that culminate toward a certain point, a feeling often arises of being in a surreal film scene as opposed to a real escalation. The impression of the unreal in these scenes charged by extremes—playing out before one’s eyes in daylight, neither rationally explicable nor comprehensible—directly overlaps with images of spectacular war movies, romantic dramas, or religious paintings. The distance accompanying this view forms the space in which irony and a kind of “bitter laughter” are the keys to opening up a dialogue with the by no means comical, real scenarios. This “equivocal zone” gives rise to the dramatic images, which you had mentioned, appearing staged. The uneasiness ensuing in the face of these construed images, in contrast to their content undeniably founded in reality, is what first opens up the realm in which the images are not only representations but also mirrors of reality.

I question whether it is actually possible for an individual image or project to have a particular fixation. In “Red House II. Give and Take,” I present an image that is absolutely not acceptable in North Korean Society. The stub of a cigarette held in the hand of a visitor is positioned in the image such that it seemingly creates an analogy to the vertical justification of the “tower of Juche ideology.” This is, viewed from the standpoint of North Korean society, an intolerable insult. But in other societies it is nothing more than a simple joke. With this image—captured through the optical perspective of the lens and as a snapshot—I neither meant to purposefully insult North Korean society nor to provoke ironic commentary. I only wanted to pose a question about the divergent reactions that occur when a fixed image is placed in a different temporal and spatial context.
Artistic projects need to be repeatedly reassessed and reviewed in shifting contexts. Firstly, the subjective points of access that one has assigned to a context are constantly changing. Secondly, peripheral conditions—positioned outside of artistic production and needing to be, in my opinion, actively considered—vary and shift to an equal degree. These fundamental assumptions are indicative of the transparency forming the basis for my moving, inserting, or removing images between and within series. In this open trial-and-error process, I observe the changes resulting from the different variants and combinations. In the case of “State of Emergency,” which you cited as an example in your question, my reflections moved along several channels. The first was the fundamental question, prefacing the large exhibition planned in Stuttgart, as to what I have essentially said

up to now and what I want to say in the future. I accept the fact that social violence is a problem in South Korea, pertaining specifically to this unique social space. At the same time, I am of the opinion that this problem is not only restricted to a single national territory. Ultimately, it is a situation that could develop in a similar way in other modern nations where police violence serves as a foundation for social control. Violence by the government against its citizens—often legitimized by the legal establishment of the state of emergency—presents similar questions on an international scale: Wherein lies the actual conflict that prompts the government to call a state of emergency? What is really concealed behind the assertion that a state of emergency is in effect? Who stands to profit? Who endorses this established means of suspending the constitutional state? Who offers resistance? This perpetual questioning with a focus on state of emergency along with the process described above ultimately led to the selection of images, of topic and title for the Stuttgart exhibition. The scenes documenting police violence, previously compiled under the title "Pictorial Riot Police," were now exhibited under the title of the whole exhibition and were supplemented by seven further associated series.

One last question: Does a solution or an offer of reconciliation exist that could be interpreted from your photographs?

I have frequently been asked the following question: "If there is a dark side to our society, what would you consider to be the countermeasure?" I can't make any suggestions here, for I don't know of any possible solutions, nor of any applicable paths. Maybe the answer is to create a certain apprehension, an uneasiness, to gather evidence, and to scatter visual clues with the aim of associating the monstrous occurrence of national violence with one's own mirror image, and simultaneously with the hope that director HONG Sang-su expressed in his film *Discovery of Life*: "Although it is difficult to become human, we won't become monsters."

Biografie / Biography

Ausstellungen / Exhibitions

NOH Suntag
Geboren / Born 1971 in Seoul, Südkorea / South Korea
Lebt / Lives in Seoul

Ausbildung / Education
Konkuk Universität / University, Politikwissenschaften / Political Science, B.A.
Hongik Graduate School, Fotografie / Photography (abgebrochen / discontinued)

Einzelausstellungen / Solo Exhibitions
2008 *State of Emergency,* art agents gallery, Hamburg, Deutschland / Germany
2008 *State of Emergency,* Württembergischer Kunstverein, Stuttgart, Deutschland / Germany
2007 *Red House,* Gallery Lotus, Paju, Südkorea / South Korea
2006 *The StrAnge Ball,* Shinhan Gallery, Seoul, Südkorea / South Korea
2004 *Smells like the division of the Korean peninsula,* Kim Young Seob Gallery, Seoul, Südkorea / South Korea

Doppelausstellungen / Duo Exhibitions
2007 *NOH Suntag and SUN-mu,* Gallery Hogishim, Seoul, Südkorea / South Korea
2007 *JOO Myung-duck and NOH Suntag,* Alternative Space Geonhi, Seoul, Südkorea / South Korea

Gruppenausstellungen / Group Exhibitions
2008 *Heartquake,* Social-Political Contemporary Art Museum, Jerusalem, Israel
2007 *Art toward the Society,* Bandaijima Art Museum, Japan
2007 *Gyeonggi, The national road No.1,* Gyeonggi-do Museum of Art, Südkorea / South Korea
2007 *The Voyeurs,* Trunk Gallery, Seoul, Südkorea / South Korea
2007 *Photography is a response,* Okgwa Art Museum, Gwangju, Südkorea / South Korea
2007 *Counterpoint,* Coreana Museum of Art Space *C, Seoul, Südkorea / South Korea
Museum of Contemporary Art, Shanghai, China
2007 *Move, from us to Earth,* Coex, Seoul, Südkorea / South Korea
2007 *Surface of War,* Museum of Peace, Seoul, Südkorea / South Korea
2007 *Landschaft – Entfernung,* Württembergischer Kunstverein, Stuttgart, Deutschland / Germany
2007 *Comical & Cynical,* Dawn Center, Osaka, Japan
2007 *Political Design & Design of Politics,* ZeroOne Design center, Seoul, Südkorea / South Korea
2006 *Asia Art Now,* SSamzie Space, Seoul, Südkorea / South Korea
2006 *Asia Art Now,* Arario, Beijing, China
2006 *10 neighborhood,* Hwangsaewool photo atelier, GwanHoon Gallery, Seoul, Südkorea / South Korea
2006 *Gwangju Biennale,* Gwangju, Südkorea / South Korea
2006 *Labor, Art, Exorcism,* Incheon Artcenter, Incheon, Südkorea / South Korea
2006 *Spotlight Woman,* Papertainer Museum, Seoul, Südkorea / South Korea
2006 *Yoga & Cofe,* ShinHan Gallery, Seoul, Südkorea / South Korea
2006 *A scene so familiar that it seems strange,* Arko Museum, Seoul, Südkorea / South Korea
2006 *Circuit Diagram,* Songwon Artcenter, Seoul, Südkorea / South Korea
2006 *Spring should be spring for anyone,* Space Peace, Seoul, Südkorea / South Korea
2006 *On Difference #2, middle corea,* Württembergischer Kunstverein, Stuttgart, Deutschland / Germany
2006 *Face of time, time of face,* Artspace Hue, Seoul, Südkorea / South Korea
2006 *Shot the Trigger,* BB Space, Daejeon, Südkorea / South Korea
2005 *Conjunction Points,* Jeollanamdo Provincial Building, Gwangju, Südkorea / South Korea
2005 *KIM In-kyu, a convicted teacher, and his inculpable friends,* Gallery KKot, Seoul, Südkorea / South Korea
2005 *Migrants' Arirang »Living Together«,* Seoul City Hall Square, Südkorea / South Korea
2005 Conjunction Point / Jeollanamdo Provincial Building, Gwangju, Südkorea / South Korea
2004 *The Persisting Moment – Okinawa Archipelago and Korean Peninsula,* P.S.1 MoMA, New York, USA
2004 *Floating Island,* Jeollanamdo Shinan-Abpae-Anjua-Palgeum-Amtae-Jawoon Island Wanderausstellung / Round display, Südkorea / South Korea
2004 *For well-deserved freedom... »manifesto«,* Korea Democracy Foundation, Seoul, Südkorea / South Korea
2004 *Flow AnyangRiver Project,* Gallery Stone & Water, AhnYang, Südkorea / South Korea
2004 *The Realing 15 years,* Savina Museum, Seoul, Südkorea / South Korea
2004 *Prohibited Imagination,* Korea Democracy Foundation, Seoul, Südkorea / South Korea
2003 *ImageAct,* Ilju art center, Seoul, Südkorea / South Korea
2003 *Welcome to SSewool,* Kwanghwamoon Gallery, Seoul, Südkorea / South Korea
2003 *A Triangle of Records and Memories,* Okinawa, Osaka, Tokyo, Seoul, Japan, Südkorea / South Korea
2001 *Photojournalism Festival,* Gallery PhotoEye, Seoul, Südkorea / South Korea

Publikationen / Publications
2008 *State of Emergency,* Hatje Cantz, Deutschland / Germany
2007 *Red House,* Chungaram Publishing Co, Südkorea / South Korea
2006 *The StrAnge Ball,* NOH Suntag, Seoul, Südkorea / South Korea
2005 *Smells like the division of the Korean peninsula,* Dangdae Press, Südkorea / South Korea

Diese Publikation erscheint anlässlich der Ausstellung / This catalogue is published in conjunction with the exhibition
NOH Suntag
Ausnahmezustand / State of Emergency / 비상국가
Württembergischer Kunstverein, Stuttgart
1. März bis 18. Mai 2008 / March 1 to May 18, 2008

Palau de la Virreina, Barcelona
Herbst / Fall 2009

Herausgeber / Editors
Hans D. Christ und / and Iris Dressler für den / for the Württembergischen Kunstverein Stuttgart
und / and
Palau de la Virreina, Barcelona

Redaktion / Editing
Hans D. Christ

Lektorat / Copyediting
Ulrike Lowis (Deutsch / German)
Dawn Michelle d'Atri (Englisch / English)

Übersetzungen / Translations
Dawn Michelle d'Atri (Deutsch–Englisch / German–English)
Elke Golchert-Jung (Koreanisch–Deutsch / Korean–German)

Grafische Gestaltung und Satz / Graphic design and typesetting
L2M3 Kommunikationsdesign GmbH, Ina Bauer, Sascha Lobe

Schrift / Typeface
Monotype Grotesque

Reproduktionen / Reproductions
Weyhing digital, Ostfildern

Papier / Paper
Galaxi Supermat, 115 g / m², 170 g / m²

Druck / Printing
Dr. Cantz'sche Druckerei, Ostfildern

Buchbinderei / Binding
Conzella Verlagsbuchbinderei, Urban Meister GmbH, Aschheim-Dornach

Erschienen im / Published by
Hatje Cantz Verlag
Zeppelinstrasse 32
73760 Ostfildern
Deutschland / Germany
Tel. +49 711 4405-200
Fax +49 711 4405-220
www.hatjecantz.com

Hatje Cantz books are available internationally at selected bookstores. For more information about our distribution partners please visit our homepage at www.hatjecantz.com.

ISBN 978-3-7757-2261-2
Printed in Germany

Umschlagabbildung / Cover illustration
NOH Suntag, Black Hook Down #2, 2006

Fotonachweis / Photo credits
Hans D. Christ: S. / pp. 9, 28, 32, 38
Alexander Stöckle: S. / pp. 13, 20, 23, 25

Eine Ausstellung des / An exhibition by
Württembergischen Kunstvereins Stuttgart
Schlossplatz 2
70173 Stuttgart
Deutschland / Germany
www.wkv-stuttgart.de

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Praktikantin / Internship
Katrin Hassler

Ausstellungsarchitektur / Exhibition design
Hans D. Christ

Technische Leitung / Technical administration
Serge de Waha

Ausstellungstechnik / Exhibition technicians
Ulricke Buck, Michael P. Hofmann, Jan Löchte, Philip Mercier, Laurens Nitschke, Vincent Schmid, Janek Sliwka, Oliver Stiegler

Leihgeber / Lenders
Der Künstler / The artist

Unser besonderer Dank gilt / With many thanks to
NOH Suntag, NOH Joon Eui, Hans Dieter Huber, KIM Hyunho, Julia Sökeland, Alexander Stöckle, Nasim Weiler
den Förderern / the sponsors
dem Team des / the team of Württembergischen Kunstvereins Stuttgart

Förderer / Supported by

Baden-Württemberg
STUTTGART
Arts Council Korea
STIFTUNGKUNSTFONDS
Mit Unterstützung der
Stiftung
Landesbank Baden-Württemberg
LBBW
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