

## **Interview with Joseph Whang 2011**

**You have released series of works such as *Reading, 2010* and *Ghost, 2010* since *Persona, 2007*. These pieces seem to reflect different aspects compared to the previous work even though they are in the same context as *Persona* in terms of photographic portraits. Tell us about the overall development in your work since the year of 2008.**

First of all, the series of *Persona* that I initiated in London in 2007 was my first portrait project and it became a starting point of my ongoing series of works that examine the relationship between the mask and the face. In *Persona*, I had dealt with the blurred boundaries between the reality and the stage, and absorption and theatricality through the faces of actors who are playing parts from a tragedy. In my recent project entitled *Reading*, my interest was more focused on 'the act of reading' as a course for an actor building up inner relationship with a character. Reading seemed to me a psychological process of voluntarily losing the reader's self while verbalizing the character's words. *Reading* is thus a work observing how this internal process of actors leaves marks on the photograph.

On the other hand, *Ghost* approaches from a different context. When I began working on photographic portraits, I found early Daguerreotypes from the mid nineteenth century as the most meaningful references. Photographs from the early days of fifteen year-span from the invention of photography to just before its industrialization hold unique sentiment and nostalgia. It is hard to define what causes the nostalgic atmosphere in those photographs and yet I was dominated by it throughout the entire working process. If that could be said to be a presence of the aura, according to Walter Benjamin, it had to do with the limitation of photographic technology and the 'immaturity' of perception towards the medium in those early years. The photography today is like a polyhedral structure of mirrors, and it has lost its early innocence while it is ceaselessly cut, analyzed, disassembled, and rearranged unit by unit. *Ghost* has its origins in this sense of loss, and it is like a sentimental homage to irreparable childhood of the photography.

**You casted professional stage actors for *Persona* and *Reading* and proceeded to take photographs of his/her process of acting. Please tell us how you accomplished an interaction with actors. And the most curious thing about it is that in what way you selected a piece of photograph in consequence of that interaction.**

The script was a tricky part of the projects when I was working on *Persona* and *Reading* series. I realized as I was working on the series that it was more effective to leave things up to actors than request what I want in terms of script and acting. So I made enough conversations with the actors before shooting in order to form a mutual understanding about the project while I left a matter of script and acting entirely to the actors. My subjects in these two projects are subtle emotions and facial expressions of the actors and these are successions of moments that you can't either predict or control. In this case, my role is strictly reduced to observation and its record. It was a deliberately planned way of working to minimize my involvement and control over subjects. The editing phase is when I intervene with my subjective decision. I usually took five hundred to one thousand shots and choose one out of those, and this process requires way more time and energy than the shooting session. So I believe the proper expression of describing this kind of work should be waiting for a moment rather than capturing the moment. I always come to realize afterwards that a certain moment is the one I wanted. Then I'm thinking to myself that 'this is the exact moment that I've been waiting for.'

**Please let us know about your intention to make a reading as your subject for your**

**series of *Reading*, and tell us about the working progress.**

Since the year of 2007, I often have had opportunities to observe the processes of theatrical productions as I was collaborating with stage actors in London and Seoul. A play is presented on a stage after going through a number of stages from a dramatic piece to the curtain rise. I was interested in the internal way of the actor's connecting him/herself to a character that only existed in a text during the reading. And the reading is also a process in which actors physicalize the language by verbalizing the same lines of their parts. It requires actors to constantly oscillate between the intelligence and the sensibility as well as the text and the imagination. In this respect, actors in a reading are open to all the possibilities and at the same time, they put themselves in endless questions, assumptions, and tensions, and through this process, the fictitious character gradually gains a certain kind of unstable 'touches of humanity'. I was interested in this fluidity implied by the act of reading, and wanted to talk about the bodies and faces reflecting this idea.

**You used a stereoscope in a series of *Ghost*. We would like to know how you ended up including a stereoscope that made a brief appearance in the early days of photographs in your works.**

The stereoscope is a simple optical device that gained sensational popularity for half a century in the mid-nineteenth century. It was a kind of grown-ups' toys designed to create three-dimensional illusion through two nearly identical photos taken in stereo. The popularity of the stereoscope is deeply related to expectations or desires towards photography. People back then experienced things like the Sahara Desert or a prostitute's bedroom as if they were a part of those scenes so that they could be able to satisfy their possessive and voyeuristic desires to some extent. But this hallucination paradoxically means going further away from the physical reality of the photograph, and the desire is always frustrated. I have always been fascinated by this fragility of the illusion created by the stereoscope. This illusion essentially implies the deficiency because it only exists temporarily while our vision abnormally functions departing from a normal focus range and its depth of image is also much shallower than the reality. I have been dealing with these elements of deficiency and instability as important vocabularies within my photographic works. And the illusion made by a stereoscope seems to me to be more nostalgic by the lack of the device.

**The sentiment of characters from the series of *Ghost* seems to be more restrained compared to the previous works. However, it also appeared to keep distance from deadpan esthetics that is presented in Thomas Ruff's series of portraits.**

Psychological effect of the series of *Ghost* has to do with the working process. I made two stereo images that are taken from slightly different moment and angle by using a large format camera and a sliding plate, and the whole process was done very slowly and repetitively on purpose. The models were requested to merely stare at the camera and also to be silent. This intended silence and slow and repetitive process were to turn the model's gaze inwards from the camera, which is not irrelevant to the way of producing Daguerreotypes of the 19th century. However, Thomas Ruff described a surface of the sitter in a thoroughly neutral way devoid of the subjectivity. It is quite different from my approaches in terms of the attitude towards involving with the subject. I also portray the surface but what I am interested in is the surface revealed as a symptom of the sitter's psychological changes.

**Your projects seem to have one thing in common: contents and meanings of your works only exist underneath the surfaces of the photographs as potential forms. How do you expect them to be delivered to or communicated with viewers?**

As a matter of fact, it is quite burdensome to think that I have to deliver something to viewers whether it is a message, a system of thought, or an emotion. I believe that it could assure more freedom to my work when I visually present my personal responses to all the light and heavy questions tossed back and forth between me and the photography, and then expect to share something with the viewers.

**Please tell us about the laughter in *Folly*. Is that laughter as a part of acting? Or is it authentic laughter?**

The laughter that is shown in *Folly* is very bodily behavior and has no subject. It is almost like a physical training, which is apparently a fake laughter. But at the same time it is laughing for the laughter itself without any impure emotion, so purer and more genuine. In this sense, the way we judge the authentic and the fake seems very subjective and ideological. Also, in terms of the psychology of acting, the emotion is just one methodology of acting techniques. There have been various techniques and methods of acting, as diverse styles and mode of expressions have existed in fine arts. For example, while 'Method Acting' completed by Russian drama theorist Constantin Stanislavski emphasizes empathy of actors as a vital way to reach the theatrical realism, the German playwright and director Bertolt Brecht tells otherwise, arguing that actors should maintain psychological distance from an acting subject so that the audience could be able to keep their critical attention to the play. From this point of view, this project seems to be closer to Brecht's approach, but the result does not necessarily lead the audience to one direction. I think that the opposed stances between Stanislavski and Brecht could live together.

**Lastly, how do you define the characteristic of photography as a social medium? How do you take your position towards the relationship established between the photography and the reality?**

I tend to have deep distrust about a solid faith and a confidence when defining something requires a certain confidence in it. So if I have to make a definition at the least, I would say that 'it is difficult to define photography and it has no fixed identity.' It turns photography into even more interesting subject of examination. Today we live in this image-saturated world and it is nearly impossible to perceive the reality without being aided by this medium, but the relationship between photographic images and the reality is very insecure like leaking ceiling. After all, it seems that my work is to explore those cracks and holes of the ceiling through my photographic practice.