

“The Triumph of Failure,” The Role of the Artist

Dr. Kang Sumi (Aesthetics, Art Critic, Researcher of Seoul National University Institute of Humanities)

“Those who fail to re-read are obliged to read the same story everywhere.” – Roland Barthes, S/Z

On October 19th, 1839, physicist and politician Francesc Joan Domènec Aragó of the Académie des Sciences (Royal Academy of Sciences), announced the invention of photography, then literally a newborn technology in the history of the image. The technology of photography had developed along with progress in materials, science, technology, and economics, and took a crucial position as a decisive and absolute medium for understanding the shift of culture in evolving civilization. Although we cannot summarize the history of evolution or of progress in a few words, few would doubt the fact that the once-newborn technology has developed throughout the modern history of civilization without fatal ups and downs and now has acquired a gigantic power that can hardly be challenged by any other medium. In other words, since its beginning, photography has been on a winning streak both in the world of the real and in the world of imagery. Due to the documentation of the real [objective] world and its non-human, or scientific-technological aspects, photography became a research topic and methodology in the field of industry as well. With the direct (re)presentation and/or diverse expressions of things based on the optical vision of the camera, photography has taken the top spot in the history of the image over the traditional aesthetic sense based on pictorial representation.

However, photography’s supremacy began to dwindle in the 1980s. The so-called “objectivity” or “transparency” of photography that had been accepted by almost all sectors of society for one hundred and fifty years was contested for its weakness— the ideological distortion of photographic representation. The belief in photographic objectivity, i.e. the camera’s ability to present truth and the essence of things as objectively as possible based upon its mechanical aspect, was also challenged ironically by the very fact that the machine is arranged by a human being and so can be manipulated by the subject’s intention. Photography had suddenly fallen under suspicious medium. Such attacks against the photographic medium occurred not in the field of science where photography was used for efficiency but in the fields of philosophy, aesthetics, and arts. In particular, the artists who used photography in their own art works contributed to this battle against photographic authority.

Why do I put forward the discourse of the ups and downs of photography in the introduction? I do not intend to survey the history of photography; rather I review photography's triumph and defeat in the context of an art exhibition. Several young artists use media works in search of the achievement and failure of photography as media, and I am writing a critical essay for the show.

The failure is triumph in photographic practice

"The Triumph of Failure" is a theme exhibition that presents the photographic works of five artists from different countries. All the works began from the concept of "failure." What would viewers think about an exhibition that aims for "failure" instead of a comprehensive representation of images and a certain degree of aesthetic completeness? What if we raise "failure" to the level of "success"? Many of us may regard the concept of "failure" in this show as a strategic cynicism toward or against the concept of "success." Or, someone might go further and expect that this exhibition would show a sort of irony of success or a dark side of worldly success. Such ideas also came to me when I first met with the ideas and materials of this exhibition.

The five artists, Martin Bardell, Sam Holde, Tess Hurrell, Jochen Klein, and Hee-Seung Chung are from the different nations of Korea, United Kingdom, Zimbabwe, and Germany, but they all met in London while studying art. "The Triumph of Failure" is their first Korean exhibition showing photographic media art works. According to Hee-Seung Chung, one of the artists and the curator of this show, "the five artists share a common interest in photography, long regarded as a representational medium, and recognize the very failure of the medium as the essence of the medium itself." In other words, the artists use photographic media as their major creative medium, yet emphasize the failure or limit of the medium instead of the successful aspects because they realize that the negative side is the very essence of photographic media. The first thing that we may imagine about the show from its title, then, if not a complete misconception, is definitely not on the mark. The artists are not concerned with the concept of success and failure of life but with the positive side of failure in terms of the intrinsic aspects of the media and art.

The concept of "failure," for the artists, refers to not a mere representation of the real but to "a process that can be closely screened and analyzed." Based on this statement of the artists, I find the "process of analysis" to be the key to this exhibition. Unlike many artists presenting intentional cynicism, these five artists do not intentionally deviate from the traditional sense of aesthetics by producing aesthetically failed photographs or by disclosing the scandals associated with photography in general. What they are trying to avoid is a series of processes by which

photographs are accepted by the public as an immaculate objective representation as in the case of a photograph shown as a perfect art object, like a luxury item displayed in the shop. This intentional avoiding (of the production/distribution process in the art market) is, for the artists, the “failure.” They claim the failure as a “triumph” for they believe that they can change the existing market environment for photo-art-work or art-photo through their performance.

As mentioned above, many artists before these five had already problematized photography’s historical authority of clarity, purity, and neutral representation and disrupted that authority through deconstruction of art works. There are a number of artists who obtained a sort of “label image” by parodying or deconstructing traditional authoritative photographic images; Thomas Demand takes photographs that are generally regarded as objective reportage such as journal photographs (i.e. Iraq War photographs) or photographs of nature (i.e. Mallorca Cave in Spain), reconstructs the photo image into a three-dimensional structure made of paper based on the artist’s own imagination, interpretation, and research, and then takes pictures of the 3-D models to present them as the final art work; Katharina Sieverding enlarges her own [private] close-up photographs or journal photographs publicized through [public] media to the size of movie screens, thereby questioning the identity of the object and revealing the problems of public photo images. Likewise, the photographic medium is giving up on its own stable status as creative medium and artists are trying to see the medium critically from a ‘meta’ perspective. Such critical attempts and views ironically contribute to consolidating photography’s potential and authority not only as a creative medium but also as a general social medium.

Then, are the five artists in this exhibition “The Triumph of Failure” also at the frontier of these changes? In a broader sense, we could say so. Yet, at the same time, their attempt seems to remain questionable; why do they search within meta-photography which has already been established as another territory of authority, pioneered and well-addressed by predecessors? Although the artists have the answers, for me their attempt to reverse failure into triumph in any sense looks like an adventure to reveal problematic points still undiscovered.

Works by Martin, Sam, Jochen, Tess, and Hee-Seung

Most, if not all, works of these five artists are grounded on analytical attitudes and methodologies that reveal cracks and holes in reality instead of mending tears by use of camera-work. Nevertheless, their works do not show un-aesthetic ugliness, pedantic attitude, or critical social messages. On the contrary, most works are composed of well-organized plasticity and visualized with terse language akin to poetry and/or emotional silence. They present photographic media works as a context or a gateway, not as a direct critique of social reality, through which viewers can begin open discussion.

Martin's "Rehearsal" is a series of "scene photographs" of theater or film sets where the actors follow the artist's direction. What draws our attention in the photographs are the exposed backdrops, posed actors with awkward postures and eyes (never close to acting "real"), and unknown stuff scattered on and around the stage. For example, "The Rehearsal" reveals the back of the stage wall exposing the temporary structure made of plywood and wooden bars, while a woman holding a bunch of papers stands unsettled between walls. On the right-hand side of the scene hangs a rope, as if it meaningfully. The photograph seems to provoke in the viewer a certain voyeuristic curiosity and so it causes a simultaneous confusion in the viewer; do we see the backstage, or the front stage created and directed by Martin for his photographic project? The answer could be both. What is more important about this project is the artist places his work on the border between the artificiality of reality and the reality of artifice, and makes us perceive the division and difference through his work.

Sam focuses on single-channel video works. He presents two different works, "70 Still Frames and 5 Minutes 50 Seconds of Video," and "Focus." In terms of technique, the former work was filmed by still camera and movie camera in order to show the still and moving images together, whereas the latter was filmed by three movie cameras, gradually focusing on three features of three different individuals. By the technique alone, we can easily guess that the artist intends to claim that photographic [re]presentation is not the perfect representation of the object as a true embodied being. In other words, photography is not a mere shift from an embodiment living and posited in a three-dimensional world to a filmic image or immaterial dat of a two-dimensional world. As in "70 Still Frames and 5 Minutes 50 Seconds of Video," an image can be presented as 70 different still cuts and also be shifted to a 5' 5" moving image. As in "Focus," the identity of an individual can be hidden, thereby (s)he becomes an anonymous being, or even an image itself. In "Focus," the artist experiments with these changes of being by smudging the identity (identifiable image) of the people on one hand and on the other hand gradually bringing into focus and so revealing their identity.

Jochen and Tess show works that obviously disclose the manipulateness of photography, with a touch of high wit. More accurately, the wit comes out of the fact that these works were "manipulated"—not the photographs, but rather the object to be photographed.

At first sight, Jochen's work looks like a landscape photograph expressing the mystery and the greatness of the universe and nature. In a moment, however, you can easily recognize that it is the photograph of a miniature landscape on the table made of aluminum foil, a wad of cotton, cloth, and paper. The title "Table-top" gives a hint. Why, then, would the artist make such a coarse landscape as to be recognized so easily? We can sense that it is not a humorous gesture from its title and supporting information provided by the artist. For example, anyone who

has knowledge of the history of photography and sees Jochen's Untitled 1 (Moonrise, Hemandez, New Mexico, 1941) (2008) would immediately be reminded of the New Mexico landscape photographed by Ansel Adams in 1941. Jochen appropriates the straight photograph of Ansel Adams (one of the members of F64 claiming photo realism), yet replaces the real object (the Mother Nature of New Mexico in this photograph) with a tiny fake object on the table. By doing so, Jochen attempts to destroy the myth of realist photography that aims to represent the "object itself." This is an act of demystifying the old myth that "photography represents the world and its essence" by playfully sending up the gravity of the institutionalized photographic art.

Tess's "Chaology" Series was inspired by the visual power of a photograph that documented a moment of explosion. We may be able to imagine what the artist felt by thinking of the shock we feel when seeing mushroom cloud pictures of Hiroshima or Nagasaki. What is interesting about this artist's statement is that she was intrigued not by the powerful explosion but by the "visual power" of the photograph itself. Since the artist was drawn by the representational mechanism and its effect upon the viewer, and not by the historic incident, she photographed the tiny simulation of the explosion using a wad of cotton and powder instead of a large-scale simulation similar to the real explosion. What we see in the picture are a black backdrop, a cute little wad of cotton hung by a line of thread, and white powder spread around. Through this non-disastrous disaster photography, we do not make a joke about the past (or ongoing) tragedy, but we do see the petrification of reportage photography into dead imagery. It is a sort of emotional callousness caused by overflowing visual images. "Chaology" Series is a serious yet witty photographic practice contesting the "visual power" that first grasped her mind.

Lastly, Hee-Seung Chung, who curated this show, has been working on portraits. Since almost all the world's photographers have worked on portrait images, nothing is special about her work. Her portrait entitled "The Reading," however, differentiates itself from others by portraying neither real nor unreal persons. A non-real and non-unreal person refers to the person who is on the border of the real and unreal as an actor. The people in the photographs are professional actors in reality. What Hee-Seung captures is the portraiture of the actors at the moment of transition to their fictional role reciting their lines. While the transition is in process, they are not themselves with real identities, yet they have not quite assumed completely new fictional identities. Or, they are both. In her picture, Hee-Seung implies the characteristics of the people in transition or of not-yet-defined subjects by depicting the unidentified eye sight, delicately distorted or absent-minded faces, sensitive posture of holding scripts, and a neck straightened up to the dark air. People often say that there is the spirit of a person in good portrait photography, and we are likely to take the photo as an image conjured up by the photographer as a psychic or magician. Whether or not such an expectation about spiritual depiction in portrait

photography is due to photography's inferiority complex toward painting is not an issue here. If this is the case with Hee-Seung's portraits, which spirit, between that of the real actor and that of the fictional persona, is developed and printed in the photograph? Hee-Seung's work tells the fact that this is an indeterminable issue. Moreover, we are awakened by her work and realize that the "subjective expression beyond mechanical representation" is another form of aesthetic ideology or ideological criteria to measure the artistic value of photography. In her recent portrait work, she produced portraiture using the 19th century stereoscope and titled it "Ghost." This is an attempt to see the essence of portrait photography from a different angle; if there really is "spirit" represented therein; if what we see is just a "visual description" depicted with the help of an imperfect representational tool. Hee-Seung, through her work, is re-viewing these fundamental issues of photography.

Two Quotations for "The Triumphs of Failure"

As a head phrase, I quoted Barthes. Barthes, being a semiologist, emphasizes that re-reading is the best way to find new stories. To recognize the world as we habitually do everyday, not re-reading the world with a disciplined ideological view, means that we, the subjects who are assumed to know the world, see and live the world with arrogant mind. Arrogance, probably due to the triumph of the past, will only lead to failure in the future. This may be true since I believe W. Benjamin was right:

How to Recognize Your Strengths. By your defeats [...] It is otherwise with a series of defeats, in which we learn all the tricks of survival and bathe in shame as if it were dragon's blood [...] Such people dwell in their strength. It is, of course, a special and monstrous kind of dwelling; that is the price of any strength. It is life inside a tank. If we live inside it, we are stupid and unapproachable, fall into all the ditches, stumble over all the obstacles, churn up a lot of dirt, and violate the earth. But only where we are so besmirched are we unconquerable.