

MoCP

Museum of
Contemporary Photography



Philippe Chancel, *Arirang* (North Korea),
May Day Stadium, Pyongyang, 2006

NORTH KOREAN PERSPECTIVES

JULY 23–OCTOBER 4

Participating Artists

Seung Woo Back
David Guttenfelder
João Rocha
Marie Voignier

Pierre Bessard
Ari Hatsuzawa
Matjaž Tančič
Alice Wielinga

Philippe Chancel
Suntag Noh
Tomas van Houtryve
Hyounsang Yoo

In 2000 French journalist Philippe Grangereau traveled to North Korea, under the guise of being a tourist. Upon his return to France, he published a small book of photographs from his tour, along with an accompanying text. The book's title, *Au Pays du Grand Mensonge—voyage en Corée du Nord* (The Country of the Great Lie), is perhaps the best starting point for research into the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK).

If Grangereau talks of a lie, someone must be a liar. Indeed, his book makes the case that the North Korean state is culpable for misrepresenting the country. I wanted to decipher this national falsehood, to try and take it apart, and to find out whether there is a truth that contradicts

it. We can already conclude that the “truth” is not something we will be able to find or identify, particularly in a country so elusive to us, and the “lie” that contradicts it is itself an unfindable truth, cloaked in propaganda. The question is, what can we learn of a country when its government places severe limits on our access?

The North Korean state uses slogans, along with imagery, photography, painting, and typography, to present a version of itself that is positive, forward-moving, blooming, growing, and most of all, happy and proud. The arch enemies of the state, the South Korean government and the United States, are portrayed as the embodiments of evil: child-murdering rapists with only one wish, to dominate the world at the cost of the North Korean people.

Through our Western eyes, however, this positive, progressive version of North Korea looks too colorful, too beautiful, too orchestrated to be realistic. Since we lack a different point of view, however, these images form the only visible identity of this country, often referred to as a Hermit Kingdom due to its isolation from the larger international community. Even if we see pictures taken by foreign tourists who are allowed to travel in North Korea, they often comply with the official version. Tourists, photographers, even the few international journalists who work in the country are very restricted in their work—what they photograph, where, and sometimes even how. State-appointed minders or chaperones are their constant companions.

In order to show the country in a different light, some photographers have been able to escape the control of these minders, or to use existing photography in new ways. Appropriation of existing work can sometimes yield a fresh view, as in projects such as *Kim Jong Il Looking at Things* as assembled by **João Rocha** (Portuguese, b. 1985), the installation *Brave New World* by **Hyounsang Yoo** (South Korean, b. 1986), or the work of **Seung Woo Back** (South Korean, b. 1973).

This exhibition seeks to confront these two different points of view: the official version of North Korea as the state wants us to absorb it, against various artists' more complex personal visions of the country. By presenting these diverse works together, perhaps we can determine whether, as Grangereau suggested, the Great Leader defines North Korea through the Great Lie, or whether we can find images that have not been produced by the North Korean state, and discover truth within them.

We begin this investigation with the work of two French artists, both living in Paris, both of whom have made numerous trips to North Korea, albeit in different time periods. **Pierre Bessard** (French, b. 1969) worked mostly in the 1990s during the last years of the reign of Kim Il Sung, whereas **Philippe Chancel** (French, b. 1959) has been traveling there mostly over the past fifteen years.

Chancel has published and exhibited widely on North Korea, and the *Arirang Festival* reflects his larger body of work. Mass games—a series of sporting events and cultural demonstrations—are staged in the May Day stadium in Pyongyang in August and September each year. As many as 30,000 people participate in card stunts to create stunning images, accompanied by performances by



Seung Woo Back, *Utopia* #011, 2008



João Rocha, *Looking at a Radish*, from the book *Kim Jong Il Looking at Things*, 2012

of power, but suggest a free interpretation of the artist's encounters during his travels. Upon second glance, however, the scenes seem to be just that: stages onto which the players appear to be placed by a director in order to be photographed. Bessard's images suggest that the North Korean people are directed in their behavior by the state, even when they are not explicitly expected to perform, as in the stadiums.

With this in mind, filmmaker **Marie Voignier** (French, b. 1974) removed all synchronous sound from the footage she shot in North Korea and recomposed the soundtrack's ambient noise in post-production, excluding the voices of the various guides and interlocutors who speak to us on screen. Aware that her hosts had been directed to tell a manicured story, Voignier omits their official narration from her film *International Tourism*, exposing the coercions of the North Korean state through their muteness.

Hyounsang Yoo, a South Korean photographer living in Chicago, uses images distributed by the North Korean Press agency KCNA in his installation *Brave New World*. As the title suggests, Yoo views the North Korean state as a Big Brother who sees and controls everything. His work reflects this position: he shows cropped elements of propaganda photography in a Kodak Ektagraphic AudioViewer Projector, thereby questioning the technological progress of North Korea but also the credibility of the images. The viewer is asked to reconsider the value of the mass grief of the Koreans when their leaders passed away, but also to question the reality of the photographic image, in which anyone can easily add extra elements to boost its message. While the pixel-perfect reality of the mass games hides people, a pixel at a time, painting in the style of Socialist Realism produces scenes that are far from reality. The last two images of the series use an iconography that is not necessarily known to those outside of North Korea. The Rising Sun stands for the Great Leader, Kim Il-sung, the eternal president, and the two guns for the liberation from the Japanese colonial yoke by the Great Leader himself.

Kim Jong Il Looking at Things reappropriates work that was initially distributed by the official communication bureau of the state. Portuguese artist João Rocha collected these images of the Dear Leader while Rocha traveled the country to give field guidance, and then he published them on a Tumblr account titled kimjongillookingatthings. The meme went viral and attracted a large following online. Subsequently, a French publisher, Jean Boîte Editions, produced a book that presents these images with matter-of-fact and seemingly objective captions such as "looking at fish," and "looking at stockings." The number of images, their similarity, the lower vantage point used to hide his small posture—often wearing a grey parka and dark sunglasses, looking earnestly at each thing, while high officials around him carry notebooks and pens, ready to note down any exclamation of genius by the Dear Leader—all this becomes an absurd and comical rendition of Kim Jong-il. Therefore, the project offers a unique insight into the strength of the personality cult that has formed around North Korea's leadership.

Even if these projects by Yoo and Rocha show images that were released by the state itself, and thereby appear to be following the official line, the way they are used and presented reveal the first cracks in the beauty and power of the DPRK. Artist **Alice Wielinga** (Dutch, b. 1981) takes this appropriation one step further by using propaganda paintings and combining them with photographs of her

hundreds of dancers. Chancel was able to photograph the event from the exact seat where the leader himself is said to watch over the spectacle. Together the perfect choreography of thousands, the iconic images showing the guns that liberated Korea from the Japanese in the 1940s, the fatherly smile of the eternal president and Great Leader of the nation, embody the allegiance of the Korean people, and the strength of its revolutionary leadership and army.

Bessard's scenes from North Korea seem to be almost the perfect opposite of Chancel's images: his black-and-white photographs are not taken from the seat

own, taken while on a tourist trip through North Korea. She was able to photograph some harsh scenes as she traveled in a group that included her father. He was the one who carried a large DSLR camera, and heavy lenses, thereby attracting the attention of the minders while Wielinga surreptitiously photographed with a small, but high-quality compact camera. The resulting tableaux contrast the beauty and prosperity of the propaganda machine with dry, discordant realities.

In *Utopia*, Seung Woo Back also communicates his own ideas through alterations to existing images. Like Wielinga, he uses work that originates from North Korea. Photographs of buildings—images churned out by the regime to show the strength and grandeur of North Korean architecture—become dystopian landscapes that, according to the artist, are more authentic than their antecedents.

Altering images and the use of Photoshop are accepted practice within the art community, especially when the resulting images are so clearly doctored and adjusted to express the view of the photographer. This practice is not allowed in photojournalism, however, where changing pixels is still considered an unacceptable lie. **David Guttenfelder** (American, b. 1969) is a photojournalist, yet his work in this exhibition represents not objective

truth but what he saw while he worked for the Associated Press bureau in Pyongyang. His was the first and, for some time, only Instagram feed to come out of North Korea. Ordinary scenes—mundane pictures of hotel rooms, a playground beside a school, a shop window—revealed a North Korea that had never before showed itself beyond its borders.

While Guttenfelder's Instagram account provides a view of the country through the eyes of a foreigner, the work of South Korean artist **Suntag Noh** (South Korean, b. 1971) gives us in the West a glance into how South Korea sees its neighbor. As part of a large body of work titled *State of Emergency*, his *Red House III* series, which he refers to as “North Korea in South Korea,” shows images taken in a historical theme park, war museum, an art gallery in Seoul, and the Imjingak Peace Park in the demilitarized zone on the border between North and South. All these places commemorate the Korean War of 1950–53. The scenes aim to provide an experience of the prisoner of war camps from the period, and what the war felt like, but also how the current regime is viewed in the South, and how the neighbors surveil each other constantly.

As South Koreans are formally banned from entering the North, we rely on those of a different nationality to provide us with images from inside the North. Photographer **Ari Hatsuzawa** (Japanese, b. 1973), for example, traveled to DPRK four times in three



Ari Hatsuzawa, *Pyongyang City Marathon*, 2012



Suntag Noh, *Imjingak Peace Park on the border between South Korea and North Korea (Demilitarized Zone)*, 2007

years. From this work he published a book, *Neighbors: North of the 38th Parallel* (2011–2012). Like all travelers to North Korea, Hatsuzawa had state minders watching his every move. But instead of challenging them, he befriended them, chatted with them, took them out for drinks, and over time gained a different type of access to the people of Pyongyang—closer, warmer, and resulting in images that show a city in bright colors with happy inhabitants. He insists that this side of life exists as a normality in the country.

The carefree happiness that Hatsuzawa shows us is not so evident in the image of North Korea provided by photojournalist **Tomas van Houtryve** (Belgian, b. 1975),



Tomas van Houtryve, *A North Korean woman loads a pistol for firing practice in Pyongyang, North Korea, 2007*

who published a large project on communist states, including North Korea, after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Posing as a European businessman looking for investment opportunities in the country, he traveled with a group from the north to the south of the county. Pretending to be in a position to provide much-needed hard currency for the North's economy, he gained greater access than most outsiders have. His work shows us broken roads, empty fields, and the ever-present images of the country's leaders.

Circumventing the all too common tendency to portray North Korea in extremes, photographer **Matjaž Tančič** (Slovenian, b. 1982) undertook a unique portrait project there in 2014 at the invitation of the Koryo Studio. Photographing ordinary citizens with 3D film, he sidestepped both sensationalistic demonization and propagandistic idealization to present instead subjects with whom we might identify as viewers, raising questions about the possibility of authentic representation within a totalitarian state.

Indeed, all of the works featured in this exhibition show diverse realities of the Hermit Kingdom, but they do not aim to provide the truth of that country, nor do they yield a definite picture of its people. While the regime strains to present itself as a utopian society where the people and the state are in complete accord—the mass games and their performances by thousands of citizens, the military might, the leaders who impart their genius insights during numerous and generous field trips—the perspectives offered by these artists sometimes confirm the official version and sometimes contradict it. Traveling to North Korea is expensive and cumbersome, and thus not easily done by most of us. Therefore, from this array of visions and opinions, we have to try and make up our own minds about a country eager to do that for us. A photograph can be a vehicle for a lie, but change the context of that picture, and it can reveal something of the truth it wants to hide.

—Marc Prüst, Guest Curator