

NORTH KOREAN PERSPECTIVES

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Viewer's Guide



This guide serves as a viewer's supplement to the exhibition *North Korean Perspectives* and contains information about the works on view, the history of North Korea, questions for looking and discussion, and suggested readings.

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Marc Prüst,

Guest Curator

Introduction

How should we approach the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, as North Korea is formally called? The country seems practically sealed off from external influence and impenetrable by anyone from beyond its borders. Travelers to North Korea can visit the country only on planned tours with state-appointed chaperones, or “minders,” who follow virtually every step they take. Independent, uncensored media do not exist in North Korea; the state press agency, Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), is the only source of photographs by North Korean nationals. In light of these restrictions, the search for insight into the Hermit Kingdom, as North Korea is sometimes called, moves to photography. We look for information in images, in spite of the fact that the state controls every photograph that comes out of the country.

The artists whose work is featured in this exhibition all devised their own strategies for dealing with the state. Philippe Chancel, for example, followed his minders’ instructions so well that the resulting images offer an uncanny view of North Koreans relative to the unified identity the government touts. Other artists— Hyounsang Yoo, Seung Woo Back, and João Rocha—appropriate images distributed through governmental channels and alter their presentation and context to warp our sense of reality. The other option, employed by Tomas van Houtryve and Alice Wielinga, is to push the limits of state control to see how well one can bypass the continuous attention of the chaperones.

The works featured in this exhibition do not pretend to serve up the reality of that country, nor do they yield a definite picture of its people. Indeed, while the regime strains to present itself as a utopian society where the people and the state are in complete accord, the perspectives offered by the artists in this collective exhibition sometimes confirm, 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.

Viewer’s Guide Contents

- Introduction 1
- Historical Context 2
- The Kim Dynasty 3
- Artists 4
- Questions for Looking and Discussing 10
- Suggested Reading & Viewing 12

Historical Context

The political bifurcation between North and South Korea was effected in 1945 from Washington, DC. With the surrender of the Japanese in World War II, thirty-five years of occupation came to an abrupt end on August 15. The political vacuum left by the sudden withdrawal of Japanese troops from Korea opened a likely corridor for Soviet expansion down the peninsula. To appease their former allies and keep them at bay, the United States partitioned Korea at the 38th parallel, giving the USSR what was to be a “temporary trusteeship” in the north. The arbitrary division foisted on the Koreans would prove lasting.

Prior to the Japanese invasion of 1910, Korea had been governed for 1,300 years by the Chosun dynasty, one of the most enduring monarchies in world history. But in 1948, under the leadership of US-backed Syngman Rhee, the Republic of Korea was newly formed in the south. To the north, the USSR installed anti-Japanese resistance

fighter Kim Il-sung as president of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK). The divide between the capitalist south and communist north was complete.

With both sides declaring themselves the legitimate government of Korea, war was inevitable. On the morning of June 25, 1950, Kim Il-sung’s

Korean People’s Army (KPA) charged across the border with Soviet-supplied tanks. (Official North Korean histories, however, avow that it was the South, acting on orders from the Americans, who had instigated the war.) When the armistice was finally signed on July 27, 1953, nearly three million people had died and the peninsula lay in ruins. The border, however, remained the same: 155 miles in length, and 2.5 miles wide, at the 38th parallel.

Propped by the Soviet Union and China, North Korea outperformed the South in the first two decades following the 1945 partition. But by the early 1990s, when it had failed to repay an estimated \$10 billion in loans, Russia curtailed the “friendship” prices it charged communist allies, demanding North Korea pay prevailing rates. China, which had provided three-quarters of North Korea’s fuel and two-thirds of its food imports, demanded payment up front. Without this steadfast aid, the DPRK spiraled into economic decline.

In March of 1993, North Korea declared that it would pull out of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, setting off the first post–Cold War nuclear panic. Considering North Korea a rogue state, the Pentagon drew up plans for a preemptive strike the following year. Former US president Jimmy Carter orchestrated a landmark summit between Kim Il-sung and South Korean president Kim Young-sam. Scheduled for July 25, 1994, it would never come to pass. Kim died of a heart attack on July 6.

He was succeeded by his son Kim Jong-il, who continued to funnel the country’s assets into expensive secret weapons projects, claiming the need for a “nuclear deterrent” against American aggression. By 1994, the economy was moribund. North Korea slid into a famine that would kill an estimated 600,000 to 2 million people, about 10 percent of the population, by 1998.

The Kim Dynasty

When Kim Il-sung died on July 6, 1994, North Koreans prostrated themselves before their country’s 34,000 statues of the “Great Leader.” The Korean Central News Agency broadcast hours of citizens weeping and banging their heads. In the months following his death, older North Koreans suffered increased heart attacks and strokes. Others jumped from buildings or starved themselves. Radio Pyongyang reported that two million people attended Kim’s funeral procession.

Soon afterward, the North Korean government began erecting 3,200 obelisks, “Towers of Eternal Life,” in his honor and ordered that calendars be changed, henceforth marking time from the 1912 birth of Kim Il-sung, so that the year 1996 would now be known as Juche 84. In preparation for the first hereditary succession in the communist world, the North Korean government conferred on Kim the title of “eternal president.” His son, Kim Jong-il, would become general secretary of the Workers’ Party and chairman of the National Defense Commission, the highest office in the nation.

Kim Il-sung had established himself as the “Great Leader” of North Korea, to be regarded as the father of the nation in a Confucian sense, as one commanding love and respect. To this day, the law requires that his portrait (now joined by his son Kim Jong-il’s) hang in every home and public building, its dimensions always commensurate with the size of the building. Once a month, inspectors from the Public Standards Police check on the cleanliness of the portraits.

Kim Il-sung’s political ideology, Juche, or national “self-reliance,” was a distinctly Korean isolationist communism (rhetoric that dismissed the utter dependence of the DPRK on the kindness of its neighbors). It would later be merged with Songun, or “military first,” the policy established by Kim Jong-il that put the KPA at the center of all decisions. Under the younger Kim, the “Dear Leader,” North Korea’s annual defense budget would grow to 25 percent of its gross national product (by comparison, it is an average of less than 5 percent for industrialized countries). No bigger than Pennsylvania, North Korea maintains the fourth-largest military in the world.

Despite this incongruity, the economic disparity between North and South is estimated to be at least four times greater than that between East and West Germany at the collapse of the GDR. Kim Jong-un, the “Great Successor” who came to power in 2011 following the death of his father, has defiantly continued the nuclear program, threatening the United States with a preemptive strike in 2013.

North Koreans, organized into fifty-one categories in three broad classes—the core class, the wavering class, and the hostile class—have multiple words for prison, much as the Inuit have for snow. Under Kim Jong-un, the extensive prison system and political purges have continued unabated. Since assuming leadership, Kim Jong-un has executed seventy officials in what has been described as a “reign of terror.” The DPRK remains completely isolated from South Korea, with no communication—email, telephone, or postal service—between them.



Philippe Chancel
Propaganda Reverse, 2012



Suntag Noh
History Park at the Geogje POW Camp in South Korea. The history park is comprised of a succession of image walls recapturing the experience of war prisoners in the nineteen-fifties, 2007

Artists

Seung Woo Back

South Korean, b. 1973

In his *Utopia* series, South Korean photographer Seung Woo Back transforms North Korean propaganda into a reconstructed photographic world that is arguably more authentic than its antecedent. Featuring monumental architecture intended to impart the grandeur of Pyongyang, the postcards Back collects and digitally distorts bear an ideological motif, one he enhances to uncanny effect through the manipulation of color and shape. Referring indirectly to Russian Constructivism, Back accentuates the vertical composition of buildings, repeating elements within their structures and elongating sections exaggeratedly. His artificial palette, which he uses to blot out entire backgrounds with swaths of solid color, mimics propaganda posters. The resulting photographs are patently unrealistic and devoid of all human presence—dystopian landscapes that throw into sharp relief the pretenses of the ruling party. In subverting the regime’s own imagery, Back visually heightens the oppressive and domineering totality of the self-professed socialist state.



Seung Woo Back
Utopia #010, 2008

Pierre Bessard

French, b. 1969

French photojournalist Pierre Bessard has directed more than a dozen reports from North Korea for the Agence France-Presse. Gaining the trust of the leadership, Bessard was allowed to tour the country extensively under Kim Il-sung’s government. From the early 1990s, he has photographed scenes unavailable to most foreigners, including the Great Leader himself enjoying a toast in the presidential palace on the occasion of his eightieth birthday. Bessard’s black-and-white images appear to be his own interpretations of daily encounters: a May Day celebration for members of the Workers Party, commemorative ceremonies and parades, workers in a glass factory. Upon closer inspection, however, they reveal themselves to be as much orchestrations of the regime as documentary photographs, stages upon which a director has placed actors in order to be photographed.



Pierre Bessard
Workers in the Number 1 Glass Factory in Pyongyang, 2001

Philippe Chancel

French, b. 1959

French photographer Philippe Chancel works at the intersection of documentary and fine art photography, fixing his lens on daily life within the enigmatic Hermit Kingdom. Ubiquitous flags, murals, monuments, and statues transform the landscape into a testament to the regime, praising the party and glorifying its leaders. Chancel's neutral but refined photographs record the political aesthetic that imbues the everyday, giving it a sense more of theater than reality. This effect is ever present, but never more so than at the Mass Games, the opening event of the two-month Arirang Festival held yearly in August and September. In a spectacle of choreographic perfection, 30,000 schoolchildren create mosaics from handheld colored cards, rotating them in unison to produce elaborate displays of North Korean legends and iconographies. Unattended by his state-appointed minders, Chancel was able to photograph the festival freely from a podium directly below the Leader’s. His central position and choice of a wide-angle lens capture the precision and expanse of a scene in which thousands of individuals submit uniformly to an ideology. Chancel’s photographs, taken on North Korea’s streets, make plain the daily reality of this subservience. His subjects appear to enact fully scripted fictional performances.



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



David Guttenfelder
The yet to be completed 105-story pyramid-shaped Ryugyong Hotel can be seen from about anywhere you stand in Pyongyang. The North Koreans started building it around 1987 15 January 2013. @dguttenfelder

David Guttenfelder

American, b. 1969

When the Associated Press founded its Pyongyang bureau in 2011—the only Western news agency to have an office in the otherwise isolated country—American photojournalist David Guttenfelder became one of the first foreign photographers based in the city. Although shepherded by official guides, Guttenfelder has made more than forty trips to North Korea to date. His sustained presence in the country has, allowed him to see beyond the secretive, hermetic facade of the totalitarian state. Opening an Instagram feed live from North Korea, Guttenfelder shared ordinary and intimate scenes with the world: a school playground, off-duty traffic policemen at a skating rink and workers at a seafood factory, men waiting at the barbershop, a dressmaker’s window and a maternity hospital, a pediatric nurse studying for her exams, and the pyramid-shaped Ryugyong Hotel, under construction since 1987. His photographs of daily life, street scenes, and still-life details reveal a North Korea never before seen by outsiders

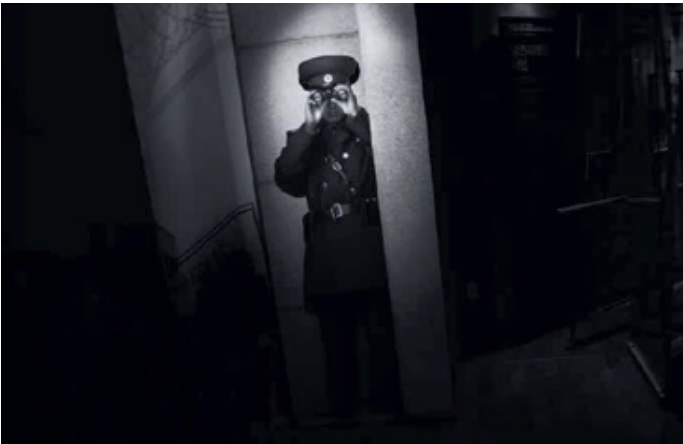
Ari Hatsuzawa

Japanese, b. 1973

Japanese photographer Ari Hatsuzawa’s portrayal of North Korea is strikingly unlike that of the mainstream media. Neither furtive nor bleak, his photographs feature amusement parks, city marathons, barbershops, and outdoor pools, all elements he insists are a normal part of daily life in Pyongyang. Making four trips to North Korea over the last three years under the auspices of the Tokyo-based General Association of Korean Residents in Japan, Hatsuzawa would charm rather than challenge his state-appointed minders. Befriending them over drinks and chat, he gained a different kind of access to the people of Pyongyang as his guides gradually relaxed their watch over him, allowing Hatsuzawa to freely photograph schools, shops, parks, even random scenes from the street. Closer and more open, with vibrant colors throughout, Hatsuzawa’s photographs offer a surprising perspective, one that bypasses militarism, poverty, and gloom and instead presents North Korea in a wholly ordinary way, its people not all that different from us.



Ari Hatsuzawa
Outdoor pool in Pyongyang, construction finished in 2012, 2002



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

Suntag Noh

South Korean, b. 1971

In South Korea, the National Security Act forbids portraying the North in a positive light. Yet ideological extremes like this one closely resemble those of the DPRK. This irony is not lost on South Korean photographer Suntag Noh, whose ongoing series *Red House III* considers the unexpected similarities between the two. Part of his larger body of work *State of Emergency*, *Red House III* explores South Korean perceptions of its neighbor to the north. Photographing in national sites commemorating the Korean War (1950–53), including a historical theme park, war museum, and Imjingak Peace Park in the demilitarized zone along the border, Noh offers us a look into the complicated relations between the two states. His photograph of a civilian officer investigating a 2007 exhibition featuring a portrait of Kim Jong-il at Hogisim Gallery in Seoul conveys the mutual suspicions and surveillance that Noh refers to as “North Korea in South Korea.”

João Rocha

Portuguese, b. 1985

In October 2010, João Rocha launched the Tumblr blog *Kim Jong Il Looking at Things*. Featuring images of the “Dear Leader” doing exactly that, often accompanied by senior officials and military personnel, Rocha’s meme would soon go viral, culminating in a book deal with French publisher Jean Boîte Editions. An art director at a Lisbon-based advertising agency, Rocha had collected photographs of Kim Jong-il during his travels in North Korea. Produced by the Central News Agency, the official communication bureau of the state, the photographs uniformly portray Kim endorsing products manufactured by the DPRK. The repetitiveness and banality of the series throw light on the absurdity of the propaganda apparatus. Rocha pairs each image with a deadpan caption that parallels the clinical look and mundane content of the photographs. Comical and bizarre, *Kim Jong Il Looking at Things* deconstructs the cult of personality surrounding the Kim dynasty.



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



Matjaž Tančič
Miss KIM and Miss YANG, 68, Meari Shooting Range, Pyongyang, 2014

Matjaž Tančič

Slovenian, b. 1982

In 2014, at the invitation of the Koryo Studio, a Beijing-based gallery facilitating cross-cultural artistic exchange, Slovenian photographer Matjaž Tančič undertook a unique portrait project in North Korea. Photographing ordinary citizens—a boxing champion learning to ice skate, hotel cleaners and tourist guides, girls practicing their marksmanship at Meari Shooting Range—he has made more than one hundred portraits to date. Tančič circumvents the all too common tendency of the media to portray North Korea in extremes. Avoiding both sensationalistic demonization and propagandistic idealization, he photographs people with whom we might empathize. His subjects personify neither the mighty and triumphant North Korea of domestic news media, nor the country that has become a permanent object of ridicule in the international press. Tančič shoots with 3D film, a nod to the popularity of anachronistic, stereoscopic postcards in North Korea. His ambition to portray people as they actually are, however, is complicated by the context in which he works. Perhaps more importantly, Tančič’s photographs point to a central concern: to what extent is it possible to authentically represent those living in a totalitarian state without succumbing to its propagandistic facade?

Tomas van Houtryve

Belgian, b. 1975

For the past seven years, Belgian photojournalist Tomas van Houtryve has been photographing the remaining communist states, infiltrating their secretive societies under elaborate ruses. In 2007 and 2008, he gained unprecedented access to the Hermit Kingdom, first by traveling under an assumed identity with a far-left solidarity delegation and later by posing as a businessman seeking investment opportunities in the chocolate industry there. While ordinary visitors are not allowed to leave their hotels without the permission and presence of government guides, Van Houtryve was permitted to photograph with some measure of freedom. Traversing the length of the country from north to south, he documented what outsiders before him could not: dilapidated infrastructure and barren farmland, ordinary workers and secret military installations, model schools, hospitals, and foodstuff factories, even the elite military academy in Pyongyang. His photographs tell unofficial narratives of daily life in North Korea, revealing the gulf between the high ideals of communism and its present-day realities.



Tomas van Houtryve
Tomas van Houtryve, *A North Korean woman loads a pistol for firing practice in Pyongyang, North Korea, August 18, 2007*



Marie Voignier
Still from *International Tourism*, 2014

Marie Voignier

French, b. 1974

How does a dictatorship present itself to tourists? Motivated by this question, French filmmaker Marie Voignier traveled to North Korea with a small digital camera, visiting museums, painters’ studios, cinema production houses, and chemical factories. While her film *International Tourism* might have simply presented Voignier’s state-appointed guides providing answers, hers is instead a silent voyage. Aware that her hosts had been carefully directed to tell a manicured story, Voignier removed all synchronous sound from the footage she shot 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. We perceive the choreography of her tour guides, gesturing like actors on a stage, but cannot hear their official narration. With their muteness, Voignier exposes the coercions of the North Korean state as it fabricates its political mythology through its citizens.

Alice Wielinga

Dutch, b. 1981

On a state-controlled tour of North Korea, Dutch photographer Alice Wielinga caught a glimpse of daily life from her van window: men lying on asphalt roads to keep warm, kids collecting acorns and digging for roots, people fishing with handmade rods. The jarring contrast between the extreme poverty her guides could not fully hide and the ubiquitous paintings of well fed, smiling children surrounding the Great Leader Kim Il- sung motivated her series *A Life Between Propaganda and Reality*. Working in a painterly fashion, Wielinga combines propaganda pictures she collected on her trip with documentary photographs she took surreptitiously with a high-quality compact camera while her father distracted their minders with his professional DSLR. Her tableaux fuse fantasy and reality, featuring images made over more than 1,550 miles of inland North Korea. The result is a whimsical new perception more surreal than the Hermit Kingdom itself.



Alice Wielinga
Harvest Time, 2014



Hyounsang Yoo
Brave New World, 2014

Hyounsang Yoo

South Korean, b. 1986

In his series *Brave New World*, the namesake of Aldous Huxley’s novel about a dystopian state, South Korean artist Hyounsang Yoo mimics North Korean media. Appropriating official photographs from the North Korean Press agency KCNA, Yoo crops them into segments, reproducing the newly “censored” images as slides to be projected inside a Kodak Ektagraphic AudioViewer Projector. Controlling every step in an intentionally convoluted working process, he then rephotographs the desktop projectors in the studio against a black backdrop, transforming the original images into new forms. The press photographs Yoo manipulates are themselves Cold War era iconographies reiterated for current consumption: scenes of profuse public mourning at state funerals, nuclear tests, mass games and military exercises, the rising sun and guns that symbolize the eternal president Kim Il-sung. Using outdated technology and propaganda still in circulation half a century later, Yoo derides the obsolescence, credibility, and tight control of North Korean media.

Questions for Looking and Discussing

1. What is propaganda? How do we identify propaganda and what do we mean by this identification? Conversely, how can we know for certain that information or imagery is not propaganda?
 - a. Look closely at Philippe Chancel, João Rocha, and Tomas van Houtryve's work to make your argument.
 - b. Think further about the assumptions you make to support your claims. What are they?
2. Consider João Rocha's *Kim Jong Il Looking at Things*. How does propaganda work differently depending on the context in which it is received?
 - a. Do you find this work funny? What is your reaction to it? Why?
 - b. How do you think these images are meant to be received by North Koreans?
3. Artists João Rocha, Seung Woo Back, and Alice Wielinga appropriate North Korean propaganda in their work. How do they change the intended meaning of that propaganda, giving it new and different significance?
 - a. What does the scale of Seung Woo Back's appropriated postcards do or suggest? What about the color palette?
 - b. In her work, Alice Wielinga overlaps official North Korean imagery with her own photographs. What is the effect?
4. Consider Hyounsang Yoo's photographs further, in which he appropriates official North Korean imagery, crops it, and represents it in a Kodak Ektagraphic AudioViewer Projector against a black backdrop.
 - a. Why do you think Yoo made the artistic choices he did to present North Korean imagery in this way? What do these choices suggest, if anything, about North Korea?
 - b. The imagery Yoo appropriates is from the Cold War era. Compare it to Philippe Chancel's photographs of the Arirang Mass Games made in 2006. What do you notice? What might this comparison tell us about the North Korean state?
5. Compare and contrast the presentations of North Korea in the work of Tomas van Houtryve, a journalist who traveled through the DPRK disguised as a businessperson; David Guttenfelder, an Associated Press journalist; and Ari Hatsuzawa, a commercial photographer connected with the Japanese Korean Friendship Society.
 - a. Is one more "accurate" or "truthful" than the other? How can you be certain?
 - b. If you are inclined to believe one narrative more than the other, explain why.
 - c. Could all depictions be accurate or true? How?
 - d. Guttenfelder works for the Associated Press. Do you think that fact informs the narrative he tells about North Korea? If so, how?
6. In his artist statement, Matjaž Tančič indicates that his work captures the people of North Korea as they really are, as ordinary citizens rather than state-controlled actors. What do you think?
 - a. How are his portraits like or unlike those by Pierre Bessard, Philippe Chancel, Ari Hatsuzawa, or Tomas van Houtryve?
 - b. To what extent can a photographer capture people as they "really are" in a heavily state-controlled country?
 - c. To what extent can a photographer capture people as they "really are" anywhere?
 - d. How does your answer to this question inform your interpretation of the other artists' work in *North Korean Perspectives*?
7. Look closely at Suntag Noh's photographs of the War Memorial in Seoul and the History Park at the Geoje POW Camp in South Korea. Compare and contrast this presentation of North Korea with the other artists' interpretations. Do you think his work is propaganda? What would you say about the subject of his photographs, the South Korean presentation of the Korean War?
8. The artists represented in *North Korean Perspectives* use a variety of techniques, formats, and materials, including Instagram and Tumblr; 3D; Photoshop and iPhones; appropriated propaganda painting, postcards, and photographs; self-portraiture; Kodak Ektagraphic AudioViewer Projectors; and books and video. What is the significance of these artistic decisions? Discuss the work of individual artists to support your claims.
 - a. Look closely at the work of Alice Wielinga, Hyounsang Yoo, João Rocha, and Seung Woo Back. Why do you think they decided to use appropriated imagery? How does the choice of source materials in each case help convey the meaning of the work?
 - b. Research the traditions of Social Realism and the Mass Games that figure in the works of Alice Wielinga, Hyounsang Yoo, Philippe Chancel, and Pierre Bessard. What does this tell you about North Korean propaganda?
 - c. How does David Guttenfelder's decision to use an iPhone and Instagram relate to the content of his work? What does Matjaž Tančič's decision to print in 3D do to his portraits?
 - d. Consider the format of *Kim Jong Il Looking at Things*. It appeared first as a Tumblr and later as a book. How do these formats affect the content of the work and shape its meaning?
9. Consider the use of propaganda in the exhibition. What does propaganda do? What are its intended effects? Might it be effective for some audiences and not others? Why? Think about propaganda within your own culture. Can you give examples? Is it harder or easier to identify propaganda from your own country?
10. What, if anything, can we know about North Korean reality? Can we say that some accounts are more accurate or valid than others? Why? Who has the authority or power to give an account that will be widely accepted as being accurate or true?

Suggested Reading & Viewing

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