

Rochester Institute of Technology

RIT Digital Institutional Repository

Theses

2003

Understanding "photograph A"

Jun ku Yoon

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.rit.edu/theses>

Recommended Citation

Yoon, Jun ku, "Understanding "photograph A"" (2003). Thesis. Rochester Institute of Technology.
Accessed from

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the RIT Libraries. For more information, please contact repository@rit.edu.

Understanding "photograph A"

Graduate Thesis
Master of Fine Arts
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
Rochester Institute of Technology

By Jun ku Yoon

Spring 2003

Thesis Board Members:

Angela Kelly, Thesis Chair, Associate Professor, SPAS

_____ Date 5/4/03

Elliott Rubenstein, Professor, SPAS

_____ Date 5/4/03

Tina Lent, Professor, College of Liberal Arts

_____ Date 5/4/03

THESIS RELEASE PERMISSION FORM

Rochester Institute of Technology

Understanding "photograph A"

I, Jun ku Yoon, hereby grant to permission to any individual or organization to reproduce this thesis in whole or in part for non-commercial and non-profit purposes only.

Jun ku Yoon

5 / 6 / 03

Date

Contents

Acknowledgements	iii
A Narrative in a frame	1
Description of Installation	5
The prior development to “Understanding photograph A”	21
Narrtological aspect of the installation	36
A narrative over the frame	48
Works Cited	52
Works Consulted	53

Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful to professor Angela Kelly, professor Elliott Rubenstein, professor Tim Engstrom and Sarah Kankiewicz-Arkins for responding generously to my proposal and appearing in my video work. I also want to express my thanks to my thesis committee for their observations, opinions and advice.

Finally, I would like to thank my mother and brother for their never-failing support.

And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

-T. S. ELIOT

A Narrative in a frame

The front door was sage-green, shabby, yet made of steel. We left it intermittently half way open for Joni to travel outside like every crossbred dog in the neighborhood does. Within a slight variation Joni had a fixed pattern of her outing time. She would always return home before six around which we would feed her and never allow her out afterwards. One day Joni never came back. As long as my memory serves me, Joni had stayed with us longer than any other dogs, chickens, ducks, turkeys, rabbits, gold fish and a cat we had. Since animals in our home would come and go, all my family members knew how to deal with Joni's absence, each one showing his or her own idiosyncratic expression of the loss. As always I was clinging by mom, calculating the intervals between her sigh and gulp, then determined the intensity of grief I was to display. Reading my mom's face was a kind of system by which I verified my moral idea. My way of exhibiting the loss was the least stylistic yet somehow most elo-

quent of all. I cried: a purely selfish cry, a kind of manifestation that proclaimed the virtuosity of my character. It was a silly belief that exhibiting such lament was an obligatory service that everybody expected from me. Nonetheless I had held the belief throughout my childhood. That day the entire neighborhood heard me crying through the green door we had left open until the midnight.

Once Joni had delivered puppies- seven multifarious ones. Among all the things I could do with the puppies, what I enjoyed most was putting them into the stories I came up with. It was a kind of adolescent day-dreaming over environment. I knew as a child what it's like to be an omniscient narrator—how mighty he can be with the unchallenged authority to dispose characters and to force them through the drama he wanted. The stories had everything: sin, judgment (or realization), and reversal. As I changed the arrangement of performers and properties on stages of my stories, the performers, seven puppies, had physically to move from spots to spots. The composition of a plot seemed to be always easier than the physical duration I need to draw from the flimsy trot of puppies. (Keeping the puppies still was, I remember, as laborious as catching a housefly with a plastic bag) For that reason I often got anxious and worn out. (Only if I would have known I could get a pose fixed orderly on a photograph! —in the second degree reality that immortalizes a slice of time.)

Docile was the name I gave the smallest and spotless puppy which was invariably favored by me for the protagonist of my stories, simply because its weak and inert movement was found to be most amenable to poses. Each day only Docile out of seven puppies had developed the quixotic mind and style. Of all things no other one's morality could be paralleled with the one Docile had developed over stories. Docile was often

enough there motionless at the decisive spots from which a boy could deploy various narratives, helping that small boy to ferment his own peculiar idea of the world which would later become the fundamental frame of his idealization. It is Docile's inanimate moments that animated my juvenile idea of eternal value.

Every spring by the time forsythias started to bloom little yellow flowers on the uphill road of our neighborhood, my mom seemed to feel obligated to buy roll film and take pictures of us, even though she couldn't always buy one for financial reasons. Spring was a busy season. It was a big thing for her to have flowers on the background when taking pictures,



The original photograph is 3" x 4"

though none of us really liked the idea; my brother and I would think as too sissy. The picture here was one taken in the springtime when Joni gave births to seven puppies.

I don't remember who was the behind the camera, yet I almost vividly recall the image of myself hustling about,

quite perky at first and slowly getting tedious with the compositional arrangement I tried to perfect for the shooting. Vaguely yet unmistakably I still feel the resonance of the frustration from the discrepancy that any artist would experience between his idea and the embodiment of it. After all those years of education in photography, I still wonder if a single image can be a surrogate for a narrative. But a small boy believed that day there should an alchemic composition that could epitomize a story of his — truly abstract but in "the way". Preparing the foreground was relatively easy: my brother reclining with his head pillowing on his left palm, the right hand relaxing fashionably on one of his knees. When the foreground

was fully elaborated with supporting actors and actresses, the puppies except Docile, the narrator was experiencing a blackout, knowing that putting Docile simply behind the front setting would leave the protagonist inconspicuous.

There needed to be something to uphold the position of Docile above everything else. So I, the narrator, entered into the frame. A transition from a third to a first person point of view: when the objective properties of the scene become the subjective environment. Now I was squatting behind my brother in the middle of the frame, raising Docile, the protagonist, to the central point. As the compositional structure became complete, the boy was still sensing something missing, a touch that would make the story more palatable. What could top the sensationalism of human flesh? Taking my shirts off, I was feeling the body temperature of Docile on my chest and chill breeze of early spring on my shoulder.

Every time I look at the photograph, I feel my shoulders gradually resembling the ones in the image as if I am feeling on them the very chill breeze of that spring. I don't really remember how we did with all those seven puppies, even Docile. The photograph only reminds me of the day when someone took a picture of us, and how I enjoyed as a boy the puppies.

Description of Installation

- **Installation: the landscape of the artist's psychology**

It seems that talking about one's own art work without any institutional backup takes a lot of courage. Nonetheless, when one turns to an art institute for the theoretical facility, he has also to undergo ceaseless confusion and self-contradiction in order to customize one's own ideas regarding art. In my perplexing years of art institutions, I would often feel caught up between incongruous ideas on art; most of the times my psychological exhaustion would be summed up as the synthetic idea. If there is one thing I discovered, it is such a predisposition that the mimesis of the world was considered as an anachronistic project. The concept of imitating the world is, it seems, now at the mercy of the psychological insights from anyone who want to talk about it. As far as my institutional experience concerns it was not so difficult to collect the art critics with psychoanalytic approach-

es. Platonic speculation, which once perpetuated the art world, has apparently given its way to twentieth century ideas such as psychology, hermeneutics and structuralism. Institutionally speaking art today refers to nothing but itself. "Art for art's sake" has long been the creed of art institution, even though it has been called into question by postmodernism. The currency of phrase sometimes even seems to be overriding the meaning of it, as if the music market is more attentive to the commodity value of Beethoven's symphony than to its musical value. Although questioning the validity of this subjugating dictum seems out of the fashion, it was necessary for me to investigate the question in order to understand how it has inflected my notion about image making during my years of institutions. The effort to reflect art autogenously within the reference of itself has only extended the abstractionism, situating art institutions in the arena of the theories of twentieth century. Equipped with a certain linguistic formula, artists in general seem to be becoming more and more conformable to the unitary market force in order to establish a currency of meaning in the art market. It has become a great deal for artists to communicate in an intelligible method that has commensurability with psychological theories. Maintaining such an intellectual level, art classes more often than not look like group psychiatric sessions in which the artwork in the discussion easily reduces to the visual epitome of an abstract theory. In an attempt to keep up in the prevailing trend, I naturally developed a strategic attitude to be fluid in the setting of institutional knowledge. Nevertheless, the installation, "Understanding 'photograph A'" began in the suspicion of my understanding of art, inquiring into my own taste for art. The idea that there could be a fallacy or an illusion in my institutionalized taste was to me as interesting as it sounds idiotic and humorous. The whole idea started with a hypothetical syllogism I came up with:

1. The institutional education enables one to expand his language faculty.
2. The expansion of one' language faculty influences the command of his reasoning.
3. One's reasoning capacity governs to considerable extent his psychology; therefore institutional education can alter in a certain manner one's psychology.
4. The alteration in one's psychology could have a possible reciprocal relation with the changes in the mode of his perception.
5. One's taste is substantially based on his perception and recognition.
6. Therefore institutions could work as an instrumental cause for some change in individuals' taste.

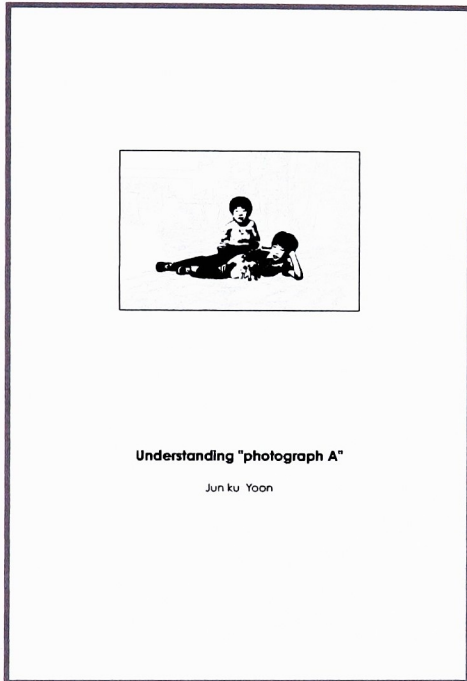
Based on such a conjectural idea, the outline for the installation took a form of investigation into the psychology of the artist. In a mischievous excitement, I surveyed my miscellaneous memories concerned with photographs, and studied the topographical aspect of my own psychology I have developed in the course of my art education. The structure of the installation was planed on the concept that the environmental fact of installation would rhetorically equate the psychological landscape of the artist.

- **Postcards as an invitation into a narrative**

Printing and circulating postcards for art shows now seems to be the invariable fashion as invitations to exhibitions, addressing the dates and locations of exhibitions. The postcard I made served pretty much the same, usual functions, except I started from it the passage of the narrative of the installation. The installation "Understanding 'photograph A' " was exhibit-

ed in the SPAS Gallery, Frank E. Gannett Building, on the RIT campus from September fifth through fourteenth, 2002. Designing for the postcard and poster, I tried to keep everything minimal, eliminating all the colors and even half tones on the photograph on it.

It was my calculation that minimizing information would enhance the legibility of the message. The graphic of it looks almost iconographic,



The front side of the postcard
4" x 6"

conveying a succinct information which juxtaposes an illustrated photograph possibly taken from a family photo album and the title of the show "Understanding photograph A" The juxtaposition in its plain cognizability implies a certain relationship between the illustrated photograph and the word "photograph A". Upon reading the postcard, it is not hard to expect that the exhibition would possibly provide a narrative about the photograph on the postcard. For such an implication, disseminating the information on the show through the postcards and posters was a quintessential component of my show: when viewers anticipate a narrative

about the photograph on the postcard is actually when the narrative of the whole exhibition initiates. The major function of the postcard was to pull from the postcard recipients the presumption that this show is about "photograph A" and possibly the "photograph A" is the one on the postcard.

- Encountering seven images

The gallery space was shared with another graduate student, Jinwhan Choi whose show, "hybrid mosaic" exhibited in the left half of the gallery. In order to seclude each one's space we used two wall-height, wooden partitions that divided the whole space in the middle into two isolated cubes. On the right half of the gallery as a private space I planned the installation, "Understanding 'photograph A'". With the aid of another

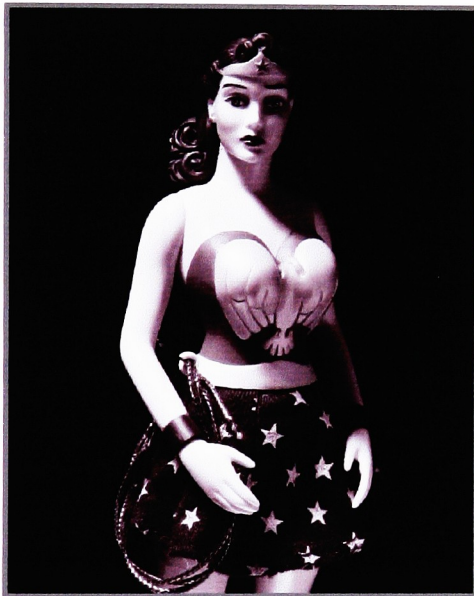
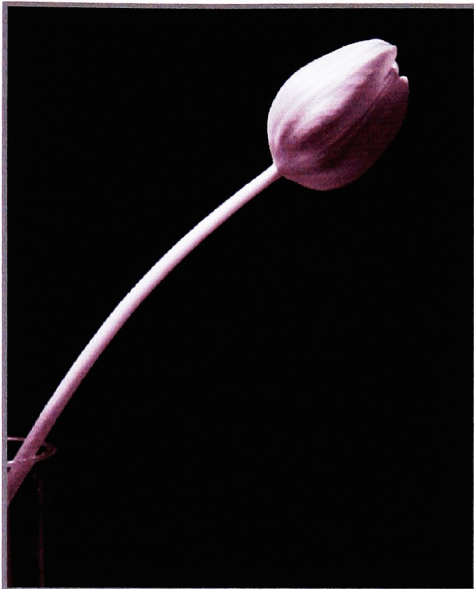


Figure 1.
Epson Inkjet Print 35" x 40"

wooden partition I was able to arrange the images as I designed the installation: seven images around walls as a group, and one as an unrelated piece on the partition. The seven images were taken with 4" x 5" black and white film and digitized through a film scanner and printed on 35" x 40" Epson inkjet papers. Neatly mounted and coated onto wood panels, the images in its big scale gives the sense of commercial billboards, each image seems as if to promote something other than the image itself. The first image the viewer encounters is the photograph of a wonder woman doll, approximately as big as an adult female. The scale of the image was deliberately calculated to anticipate viewers' psychological juxtaposition between the doll and the viewer. In front of the image the viewer is to be confronted by a life-size mannequin staring directly at the viewer while the viewer realizes the parallel relationship in size between the mannequin and the viewer. Although the photographed object was only a foot-tall, aided by zone system technique and new digital gadgets, I was able to maintain pristine details as to convince the viewer of the verisimilitude of its scale. The viewer meets the super heroine, her impeccably smooth rubber skin glaring in light, and her voluptuous breasts sustained by a patriot-

ic emblem. Surrealistically just against the black background this plastic figure claims its acknowledged identity, the artificiality of everyday.

Despite the fact that there is nothing natural about the figure, somehow



nothing seems more natural than the consumption of this image. Who among us would feel estranged from the very aesthetics of the pop culture?

Moving onto the next image, the viewer is disillusioned by the sizes of the photographed objects. Here the immensely enlarged image of a tulip, the bud as large as the torso of the wonder woman, brings the viewer to the realization that he is experiencing the tremendously augmented images in the scale. The frail and vulnerable physique of the tulip traverses obliquely a black frame.



Somehow the defenseless exposure of the flower seems to carry a vigorous and even aggressive utterance. As we know that the contemporary commercialism is well aware of the power of the beautiful and never shies away from utilizing it, encountering the beautiful now induces more of a symbolic game than taintless appreciation.

Against the same black backdrop are militantly standing two soldier action figures that appear to be on the brink of conducting machinery violence. Looking unsatisfied, yet pronouncing the aesthetics of regimentation, the soldiers

Figure 2. & Figure 3.
Epson Inkjet Print 35" x 40"

appear to pose a demand of a certain order, possibly a totalitarian system. Noticing the same repetitive background and the simplified settings of the objects, it might occur to the viewer that there could be a certain connection among the symbolic meanings of each object. But it was also my intention to put the viewer through the sequence of images without letting them

know the complete scheme of the layout: it was a premeditated staging in the sequence of the narrative to expect from the viewer his own pedantic

speculation on those images.



The fourth image is the most abstract of all, showing only a fraction of ornamented round-shape frame, possibly an empty frame or a mirror. It is actually a mirror with a decorated frame around it. The intended symbolic meaning for the image was the modern consciousness of representation, especially the consciousness in the act of representation. Bearing no reflection in the frame, the image of 'void' mirror illustrates its function and the function alone. Thus the image of a blank mirror is, I might say, about the representation about representation. Throughout the installation this frame of mirror plays an anchor point to which all the frequencies of the narrative are brought together recurrently. Setting the mirror image as a narrator-agent, the installation mobilizes an inquiry for the gaze of the contemporary society, particularly for its interest that has shifted from the semantic approach to the grammatical understanding of the representation.*

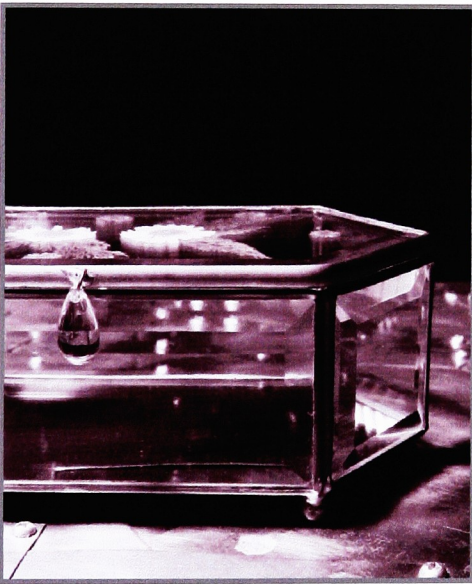


Figure 4. & Figure 5.
Epson Inkjet Print 35" x 40"

After the mirror image, due to the physical condition of the gallery space, the viewer is to travel across the room

* I used the words, semantic approach, to address the old praxis of art consumption whose main focus was on referential content of artwork. As the theory of structuralism and deconstructionism influenced the art environment, the structural form and style of artwork have been given critical examinations. This has created a new atmosphere in which the value of interpretation of artwork was reconsidered in the context of structuralism. In structuralism the nature of representation itself became a locus of study, developing diverse opinions and systems that explain the grammatical aspect of any signifying order. One of such examples would be narratology (narratology studies the nature, form and functioning of narrative regardless of medium of representation.) In visual art this trend has been reflected in the reconsideration of exhibiting space which resulted in new modes of representation such as Fluxus, Earth art, Installation art, etc.

The Installation



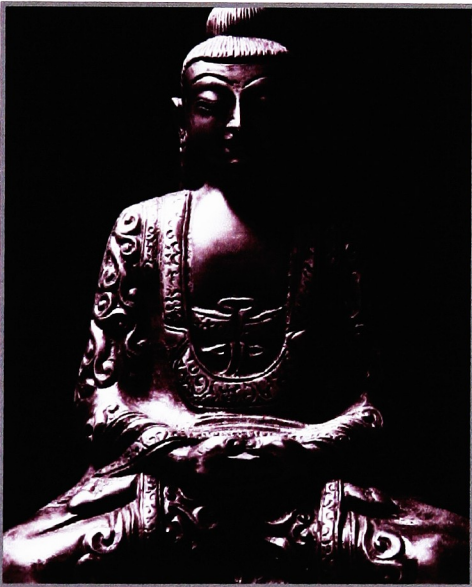


Figure 6. & Figure 7.
Epson Inkjet Print 35" x 40"

for the continuation of the series of images. Anyone might have an experience of owning a overly embellished container, whose due function somehow seems to outweigh any actual need to storage existing belongs, only making it functionless. Although it sounds preposterous to combine exuberant decorations with practicality, such fictive devices do prevail in today' market, appealing to the romantic sensibility of consumers. A small, cheap jewelry box, metaphorically insinuating the commodification of sentimentalism, is demanding the delicate attention from the viewer as a fifth sequence of the images.

Moving on to the next, there is the image of a ubiquitous object, almost banal, yet its unique identity is never mistakable— an old photograph. Encased in a wooden frame is a Korean family of three generations, only the grandfather and mother in traditional Korean dresses. In the parallel layout with other images whose metonymical aspects are more or less lexicographical, the viewer could guess that its symbolic meaning could be about remembrance or nostalgia.

Finally, as the last image of the order I chose a bronze statue of Buddha. As Christianity has in the western culture, Buddhism until recently had been the fundamental domain of the oriental aesthetics, desire and morality. Therefore it represents symbolically the artist's indigenous tradition that is suffering disintegration. Passing through these seven images the viewer might experience the vigorous reasoning, trying to extract a logical relation out of the sequence. It was exactly my plan to put up atmosphere of a customary gallery space, inducing psychological tensions

around the intelligibility of the images.

- **Identification for “photograph A”**

Unrelated to the seven images, a smaller print is hung on a separate wood partition, whose gilded frame instantaneously discriminates the photograph from other seven images. If the viewer is familiar with 19th century photography processes, he would identify this image as a platinum and palladium print, directly exposed from the original negative. For those without such a sophisticated taste for 19th century photography process, I intentionally put on a title tag with a description: *untitled, platinum and palladium print, 7" x 17"*. In order to fabricate the quasi-value of the image, I used deliberately one of the most cumbersome and expensive processes, going through handling with a bulky 7" x 17" camera and notoriously toxic chemicals for platinum print. Therefore, elaborating the photo process and its technical value was a deliberate and also apt process for the conspiracy of the installation to enhance the demand for the special attention on this particular image. In this differentiated frame the viewer sees the seven items from the previous frames all together placed on a metal swing table. Using a single spotlight, I photographed the table in a sullen tone, casting very harsh shadows and isolating the objects from the background. The distinctive texture of the platinum print also accommodated the sober strain of the image. Everything in the frame is clearly identifiable and the arrangement seems to be premeditated with some mathematical precision as in a film-noir scene. Nonetheless, the orchestration looks out of joint. The composition of the all objects invokes a certain disturbance, a feeling about something completely artificial, fictitious and

grotesque, as if one is confronted by Frankenstein's monster. Is it the "photograph A"? Is it about the identity of the artist? The layout of installation is supposed to guide the viewer to think of the image, *untitled*, as "photograph A", since there is only one image distinguishable from the others both in its format and medium. However, if this platinum print is the "photograph A", there remain an unresolved disagreement between the main image of the installation, *untitled* and the one on the postcard. Which one is "photograph A"? And what relationship could there be between the two?



Figure 8. platinum and palladium print 7" x 17"

- **The video manual to the artwork**

Where the question lingers is actually the transitional point of the narrative of the installation. The physical environment of the installation was designed as the scenic properties of the narrative on which the reversal of narrative will unfold. The installation of eight images represents metaphorically the artist's struggle for his identity. The struggle is strenuously engaged with the artist's aspiration to understand the collective aspect of his characteristics within the context of institutional knowledge. The selection of items was highly contrived to the degree that each object can be reduced to the register of the post-modern condition. For the counterplot of the narrative, the actual installation space was intended to be seen in a way as a simulation of art installation. At the right corner of the room, I prepared a white TV and VCR combo on a white pedestal for the viewer to play at will an 8-minute videotape. This is the tangential point at which two different instances of the narrative are merging, bringing the contrast between the two into the complexity of the narrative. As the videotape starts to roll, the narrative about "photograph A" continues, pulverizing any prejudgment about "photograph A". As we are familiar with pre-information of any blockbuster videotape, the videotape begins with a text announcing:

**Due to the idiomatic response of the viewer or
the artist's post-experience to this work,
the significance of this work is subject to change.**

Please, be advised.

I wrote this facetious statement in regard to the postmodern fashion in art consumption, implying the artist's consideration of the deconstructionism. The statement in a way asks the viewer to have a free association with the work. At the same time this statement entails a voice that addresses the level of narration, informing the viewer of the whereabouts of the narrative progress. It is also the point where the artist connotes for the first time that the stress on the title "Understanding photograph A" wasn't put on "photograph A" but on "Understanding". The whole instal-



This animated figure introduces himself as the artist.

ation was plotted to illustrate the process of appreciating photographs, not to expand the importance of a particular photograph. The statement is soon followed by an animated title, "Understanding photograph A", and then by an illustration of a human face. On white background a boy's face fades in as if in a 2-D animation. The face was posterized into four tones and blurred in Photoshop to bear a cartoonish quality. Soon this face starts talking in a boyish tone, identifying himself as the artist of the installation and the videotape as the manual to the installation. After a brief introduction by the boy to the video manual, the face is replaced with the circle frame of mirror which was the fourth sequence of the seven images, and it is also the object placed on the center of the platinum print. The signification of the mirror in the video has the same connotation as it was mentioned before: the representation about representation, more specifically it is about the representation referring to its own art of signification. Hovering on white background like the face, the mirror is now literally a frame (the mirror) in a frame (the TV monitor), which shows the video clip like a magic mirror from a fairy tale, "Snow white".

The video footage on the mirror consists of six chapters, each one

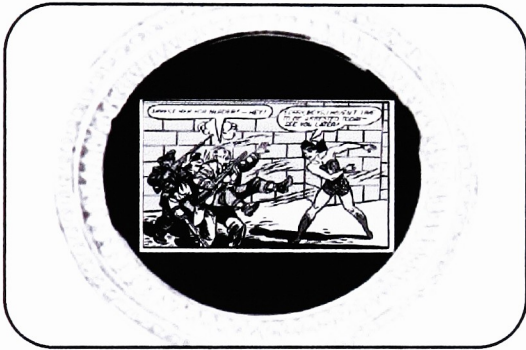
with a title. The story line was interlaced with two different types of video clips alternating (type 1: the video footage of three RIT faculty members and one RIT graduate student who are giving the interpretations and

reviews on the platinum print, which is now installed in the gallery. Type 2: computer generated footage with a voice-over telling private anecdotes of the boy who claims to be the artist.) By type 1 I tried to represent the institutionalized understanding of a particular photograph (in this case the platinum print). Thanks to professor Angela Kelly, professor Elliott Rubenstein and professor Tim Engstrom who are generously responded to my proposal for the installation, I was able to create video footage as I pre-visualized. In the video each faculty member extracts, in his or her own unequivocal eloquence, the intelligible issues from the subject matter and formal elements of the photograph, some reflecting their own psychological take on the image, yet turning it subtly to the history of humanity. As I gained the footage, I was very satisfied with the sophistication of their speech and moreover with how studious they look on the monitor. Mischievously yet without any mal-intention, I juxtaposed them in contrast with an unfashionable and naive utterances of a small boy whose story is uncouth and provincial yet playful and comical. The whole idea of the juxtaposition seems ridiculously incongruous and even laughable; for all that it creates a pensive mood in which the whole expansion of the video boils down to the cardinal question of the installa-

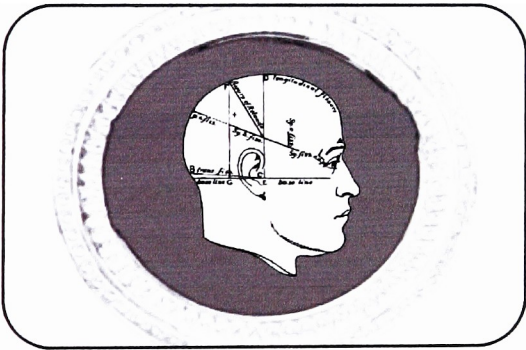
Professor Kelly giving her review on the platinum print.



The boy's voiceover is narrating his anecdote about Wonder woman.



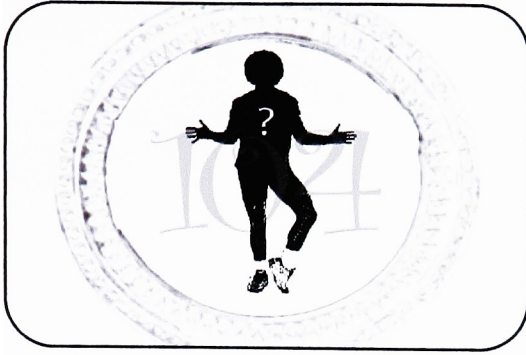
The title of this chapter is *The conjectural composition of a KITSCH-MAN (or an identity)*.



Professor Elliott Rubenstein elaborating about the possible interpretations of the picture.



The boy's voiceover is contrasting in his anecdote the practice of Zen Buddhism in Korea and commodified version of Zen Buddhism in U.S. over the image of Richard Simmons.



Professor Tim Engstrom mentioning the narrative quality of the picture.



After closing his commentary on the video, the boy starts singing a song about Wonderwoman.



The animated face fades gradually out on this photograph.



tion, how to understand photographs? — A silly but fundamental question, very exhaustive but indispensable. Even if I have never foisted the question word for word, the whole plot of the installation was designed to raise a validity for an reexamination on the social landscape of the consumption of photographs, and how easily one subordinates his own taste to it. However, no answer has been devised to be found, rather I wished that the juxtaposition invokes a complex psychological moment in which the objective establishment and the subjective experience adulterate.

After the final chapter, which is the footage of professor Tim Engstrom giving his opinion, the mirror transforms into the boy face. As the boy finishes his closing, he has a sulky pause before he starts to sing a children's song in Korean about Wonder woman. Finally the face is zoomed out, fading gradually out to be superimposed on a color photograph, which was the one on the postcard. The route of the narrative that was initiated from a postcard finally returns to the same image. Metaphorically, the whole narrative "Understanding photograph A" has been told through the channel of the artist's memory by the young version of the artist who dwells timelessly on an old photograph.

The prior development to “Understanding photograph A”

- A parody of oneself as an in-between point of view

Gathering and formulating the idea for the installation, I found myself in a Catch-22 situation, because the initiation of the main idea seems to betray in the method the very purpose of the idea (stripping myself of the habit of turning to reductionism for interpretations). How can one validate his idea and sensibility without turning to objective measures? If I turn away from the reductionism, using a private voice, the project would look more than likely narcissistic and vain, whereas the use of an objective point of view, as a scientific method, would make the autobiographical work sound like a dry, pedantic self-portrait, which is against the motivation of the work. Secondly, I need to consider any possible interpretations to be entailed from the audience of my work. Since the installation was going to be in a sense about a speculation on interpretation as well, I

thought it would be appropriate to restrain from using any significant elements that are too obvious to invite the systems of theories for its interpretation; although I believed that it was not completely feasible.

According to Susan Sontag in her essay, *Notes on "Camp"*, art may evade the interpretation by becoming merely decorative, abstract, or a loud parody as in pop art. Since it didn't seem possible to make the narrative merely decorative or abstract, I decided to make the narrative a parody of myself: it was a solution to avoid interpretations based on suspect theories, at the same time a solution to situate the narrative instance between the third and first person point of view (a narrative instance neither too scientific nor stuck on oneself). The installation "Understanding photograph A" is a narrative about one's taste, about one's sensibility, and most of all about one's theatricalization of memory; it is a process of understanding self. However the narrative has by no means been composed to illustrate the pseudo-intellectual knowledge of self, rather it is a farcical caricature of one's autobiographical confession about the devastating confusion he has gone through to understand himself and his relation to photographic images. More specifically, the installation is an illustration about one's phenomenological understanding of what it means when he is looking at photographs.

- **One's taste as a window to one's consciousness**

The state of one's taste is always tentative. One identifies his taste between the recollection of the past and the seduction of the new. It is the yoga of choice: speaking for taste is like walking on a balance beam; falling onto one side of it, one might get accused of being too old-fashioned and

stubborn, on the other side, of being rootless and frivolous. However, what makes it a private affair is the fact that both the accuser and the accused are on an immediate level the same person. For Sontag “taste governs every free human response.”

Although exercising one’s taste is totally subjective, the individuality of taste tends to be gregarious, establishing certain architecture of taste within a society. On both individual and social levels the treatment of taste is serious and vigorous business, since the issue of taste becomes more and more the image of identity; especially in a commodity culture where one reflects his existence based upon shopping patterns. To maintain a keen taste is to stay precise in observation. It is impossible to display one’s taste for a category without showing the faculty to understand it. In this sense the relationship between taste and understanding needs to be weighed. Exhibiting tastes appears to be a delicate social behavior. Talking about someone’s bad taste is a circumlocutory expression of one’s ignorance. Yet, it is politically wrong to equate one’s dignity with one’s taste. Nevertheless, modernism, in order to discriminate cheap tastes, has given a name to the bad taste — kitsch. And soon pop culture put this phenomenon on a stage; making it as a genre, “Camp”*. Given this understanding, I have come to believe that scrutinizing and studying one’s taste will help locate the whereabouts of his consciousness.

* Camp is an affectation or appreciation of manners and tastes commonly thought to be artificial, vulgar, or banal. According to Sontag, “the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration.”

- **The Ugly Duckling (a kitsch realized)**

The marketing strategy of magazines today is ambassadorial, meaning the titles of magazines have to bear diplomatic qualities. They not only authorize behavioral codes but also provide the virtual unions of sovereign sects, which require different attitudes for an access to each. Flipping through a magazine, one might get puzzled over ads whose images show nothing but attitudes, no product, no denotative copy. More often than not what those images are trying to sell is the mode of experience. Simply imitating the choreographies of the models with aggressive attitudes, the consumers get the benefit of the whole package of taste; therefore the manufactured identities are realized. As industrial societies mature, we have come to the point where a super-express cause for an effective identity is available at a sliding of a credit card. Here, claiming one's own image is merely becoming an echo of the advertisement; only the credit card bill is real. When such a social phenomenon is prevalent and even looks natural, talking about kitsch would only sound pretentious and fastidious. It seems now to be more consequential to understand kitsch sensibility than to discourse the social effect of kitsch. One of my previous video projects, "Constructing a chicken" was the main locus of kitsch study. In this project I studied the aspect of kitsch so as to inquire into the extent of the synthetic nature of my identity. I worked on this video project for the winter quarter, 2001 during which I exposed myself to the various theories and histories of art. Even though it helps lifting the misty idea about self, sidling inside the labyrinth of theories was, from my personal experience, nothing effectual. The critical theories and other continental philosophies that I had come across, appears in my view, simply scandalous. In the process of rediscovering myself on the map of such historicity, I was mentally to experience

the collapse of the legitimacy I had believed to be there in the succession of the Korean sensibility. Like in any other third countries, Korean's sensibility has been being encroached by the relentless tide of the globalization whose aesthetics lies in the effect of syncretism. The tradition of Korea has slowly been losing the potency to inseminate its spirits into the young generation, scorning helplessly over the cultural mutants of its descendants, the "kitsch-men".* Conversely, young generation also suffers from the irony in the introspection over its authenticity. In a sense it sounds much like one of Andersen's fairy tales, the ugly duckling: one suffers from his self-reflection that doesn't resemble his mother; however the difference from the original fairy tale is that in this post-colonial situation the mother is the real biological mother. Instead of discovering one's true identity in an authentic background, a "kitsch-man" discovers his identity in the process of synthesis. Along with the development of such ideas, I also fashioned my visual idiom to explore the psychological status of a "kitsch-man" as a self-portrait. Upon engaging in postmodern theories, I examined my idea for the identification for its origin: ideas are dissected and get assorted by symptoms and finally diagnosed such as a Freudian, a Marxist, a Lacanian, etc. It appears futile to proclaim a unique individuality of idea in the arena of postmodern theories; therefore having opinions and attitudes based on selected theories is the matter of taste. Here what is left of the individuality is only the style in the synergetic approach to different ideas. sponsoring cultural hybridity, Postmodern societies, sponsoring cultural hybridity, commodify ideas for individuals to adapt and synthesize.

* I borrowed the term, "kitsch-man" from Calinescu, Matei in his book, *Five Faces of Modernity*. Calinescu uses this term in his illustration of the phenomenon of kitsch, especially in historico-sociological and aesthetic-moral approach for an understanding to the phenomenon. A kitsch-man is, according to Calinescu, "one who tends to experience as kitsch even non kitsch works or situations, one who involuntarily makes a parody of aesthetic response."

Such a cultural climate often incubates an outlandish synthesis of individuality. In my video project, "Constructing a chicken", I mainly concentrated on the sensibility of a "kitsch-man" who develops an idiosyncratic identity by putting together fragmented understanding of himself from different perspectives. I used chicken parts as a metaphor for fractionalized selves whose formulas come from different departments of the multiculturalism. Combining such pieces into a whole is the serious personal task of a "kitsch-man". In order to incarnate this literal concept effectively into video images, I specifically turned to one of my visual interest, the film noir. Since the visual metaphors I contrived principally deliver the conceptual idea about "kitsch-men", I had also to work separately on the style that would bring on the emotions and intensity to punctuate the kitsch sensibility. For this purpose I studied film noir as the mode of sensibility.

- **Sensibility as a genre (The study of film noir)**

Because of its diverse story possibilities, and artistic and cinematic traditions, some film critics don't classify film noir as a genre like they would with the western or gangster movies. However there is an element that penetrates all of film noir— its idiosyncratic stylization. Film noir, in most cases, deals with the mood of disarray and blackness. Its "narrative method is twisting, indirect, often deliberately puzzling." The abstract representation in this genre does not rely on the affinity between the object and the represented, but rather creates contextual understanding of the signed relationship. Every so often the story line of this genre depends on the uncertainty of its development, and on subtle and vague visual code to maintain its distinctive style. Certainly, clear subject matter should be

absent in its grammar. In other words film noir is a genre that is free from the old idea of a good text, that the idea or content is to be clear and employs a style of intended meaning. But in film noir the representation is

highly connotative and it is difficult to draw a single interpretation. However, as film noir has been acknowledged as a accepted genre, the implied codes of film noir bear a certain psychological implication. It does not have a direct association with the object, but in its arbitrariness, it has a metaphorical attachment. Sometimes audiences should grasp the contradictory clues in order to draw the psychic-analysis of a character. For example, "reflections in mirrors and windows are a recurrent aspect of noir iconography. The double images suggest schizophrenia and masquerade.

Not every modality of film noir's grammar has been established within the history of its practice. Film noir borrows some of its codes from art history. Early films noirs borrows from the German Expression dramas (rain-swept emptiness illuminated by stray flashing neon signs and a few deserted streets) Film noir uses the same kind of setting recurrently: night clubs, hotels, staircases, tenements, police stations, offices, docks and drug stores, factories, warehouses, crumbling mansions, boxing arenas, train stations, restaurants. Even though these settings have semantic meaning, actually these are used as components for certain syntax. Each one of film noir is representing a certain sensibility that is grounded upon a particular configuration,

The basic frame of the chicken was made of chicken wire and other hardware parts.



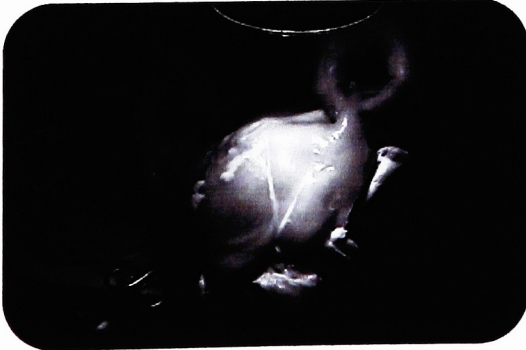
Preparing the visceral part of the chicken. (what actually was used for it was a chicken liver.)



Inserting the prepared visceral part into the metal frame.



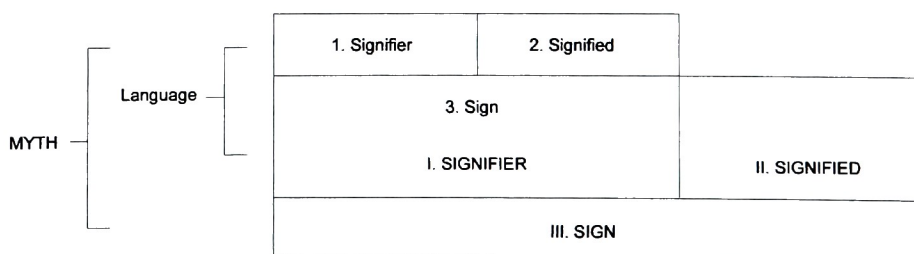
Covering the metal frame with chicken flesh.



which is bound by the semiotics of the cinema. However, it should be mentioned that this configuration totally relies on the history of the arbitrariness in its representational method as described above.

- **Understating genre as a signifier**

In order to understand the lexical value of genres or styles, it is very helpful to refer to Roland Barthes' idea of "metalanguage". For Barthes everything can be language as long as it has the structured manner to carry meaning. When something (whether it is pictorial or written) evokes a certain image from consciousness, the connectional process can be illustrated as a relationship between "a signifier and a signified". Barthes continues "the signifier is the acoustic image and the signified the concept... There are functional implications in this relationship." This is the most basic semiological system and Barthes calls it the "language-object" system. This mode of representation establishes condensed lexical meaning as it is practiced repeatedly in the society. This is what Barthes calls a sign: an inseparable association of concept and sound-image. The embodiment of sign is possible by the history of language practice and in this tri-dimensional pattern (a signifier, a signified and a sign) the sign (a established representation) again function as a signifier. Barthes looks at this whole linguistic system as the culprit of myth creation. Below is his own diagram of what he calls a *second-order semiological chain*.



Stitching up the applied chicken skin to seal the wrap.



Screwing a bolt into a chicken leg for bracketing.



A new identity was created as a result of the construction.



The functional implications made by a second-order chain acquires a signification and it has, according to Barthe, "a double function: it points out and it notifies, it makes us understand something and it imposes it on us." The reception of meaning can be processed in more than one way. There are various ways to signify one concept. It means that a signified can have multifarious signifiers. "The concept is, quantitatively, much poorer than the signifier." In film noir the repeated uses of diverse setting often confuses spectators in terms of its postulated reading. This happens because spectators try to attain to a single plotted meaning through the more than one signifier. However, once an interpretation is pulled out, the meaning is no longer obscured on the level of myth. A concept drawn out of this system becomes a constituting element of myth. Here "conceptual neologism" is not generated in an arbitrary way: its formation customarily depends on a "highly sensible proportional rule".* Given this idea, through using recurring signifiers, it becomes easier to see why film noir can be viewed as a distinctive genre even though its consistency lies only in its style. Its system of communication itself becomes a sovereign message: it becomes a sufficient factor that allows one to derive a concept or an idea

from. The genre, film noir, has a semiological system that is very sophisticatedly encoded. This system as a message develops into a sign and then again a signifier.

* Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Paris: Hill and Wag, 1957.

The purpose of studying film noir (its linguistic effect as a genre) was mainly to stylize the visual idioms with which I executed my video project, "Constructing a chicken". Adapting film noir's visual vocabularies so as to create the syntax of my own mode of photography, I brought about an eccentric pastiche of a film noir. Under a single light source, as in the interrogation scene from a suspense movie, two anonymous hands against the black background are moving busily and seriously, reconstructing a new chicken from prepared carcasses of chickens (by stitching one chicken part onto another). The ghastly performance progresses in an unreasonably crude manner, reflecting the naive and unsophisticated consciousness of the conductor. Ironically this visually abominable process effectuates a black, yet farcical atmosphere. It is the comical strain of the video work that bred a metaphor for a black, grotesque consummation of self. For the sound track to accommodate the visual sequence, I employed the avant-garde jazz from the 60s, whose saxophone solo doesn't follow the melodic structure and furthermore breaks up the conventional music time. The off-beat progression amplifies the intensity of the black scene, especially accentuating the graveness of the artist in his will to construct self. As the emotional complexity saturated in the blackness traverses along the derangement of the free jazz, this satirical video calls for non-conventional but sincere empathy from the audience. I felt elated over the video because it seems to be a new way to articulate my hybridized identity.

- **Retrieving memory through photographs**

Nostalgia for me is an error of consciousness. For one consciously invites the mood, yet is never able to dispel the lingering effect of its whimsicality. It is an obstinate seizure caused by the intrinsic incompatibility between one's images of the presence and of the past. However disoriented one remains, one always needs, I believe, to dabble in the flow of such emotional tides, since it is these attacks of emotional seizure that enable one to legitimate the authenticity of one's own history. - a genuine way to distinguish oneself from everyone else: avoiding such spasmodic moments causes the impoverishment of memory, hence losing the ground for the legitimate identity. Often in the Sci-Fi movies technology can surrogate all the human traits. The memory is one of few things left that suggest a trace of human quality. For example the movie, *Blade Runner* provides the moot question about memory as a measure for the humanness. The movie begins as the following text scrolls up:

Early in the 21st Century, the TYRELL CORPORATION advanced Robot evolution into the Nexus phase- a being virtually identical to a human - known as a Replican. The NEXUS 6 Replicants were superior in strength and agility, and at least equal in intelligence, to the genetic engineers who created them. Replicants were used Off-World as slave labor, in the hazardous exploration and colonization of other planets. After a bloody mutiny by a NEXUS 6 combat team in an Off-world colony, Replicants were declared illegal on earth -under penalty of death. Special police squads- BLADE RUNNER UNITS— had orders to shoot to kill, upon detection, any trespassing Replicant. This was not called execution. It was called retirement.

In the film the physical aspect of the Replicants, the genetically engineered surrogate human beings, is virtually indistinguishable from that of

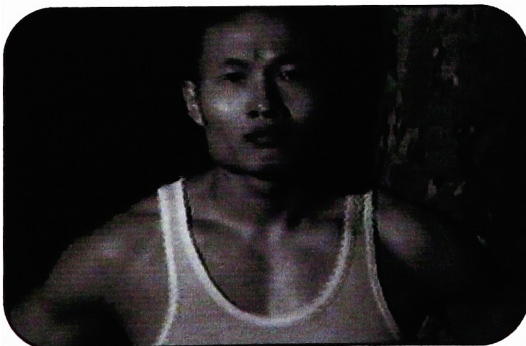
actual human being. In order to distinguish, a test is given to the Replicants. The test is designed to evaluate the testee's emotional responses based on the extent of their life experience; the emotional developments of the Replicants are limited at most by four years, which is the genetically designed their life span. The very interesting part of the movie was that there was an experimental Replicant, Rachel, who is different from the others, because she has an implanted memory. After the test by a blade runner, Rachel, whose emotion has the depth of time, becomes suspicious of her own identity and even of her memory. In order to verify her own memory Rachel shows Decard an old photograph taken when she was a child with her mom. But it is useless, he tells Rachel that it is the photograph of someone else, the real owner of Rachel's memory. At Decard's insensitive utterance Rachel runs away, the photograph dropped on the floor.

This particular scene provided me with a psychological paradigm in which I tried to test the credulity of my personal premises about the relationship between memory and photographs. Rachel, holding out her photograph towards Decard, tries to verify her private historicity. Was this gesture really towards Decard or towards herself? In the same empathy that has been invoked by the scene, I asked myself: what signification does it have when I am looking at an image of myself in a photograph? From my point of view what I see from photographs of myself is an ontological connection to a past, as opposed to an analytical example of how I was. The history of photography and the theories of reductionism are, fundamentally speaking, extrinsic to my relation to my own photographic images. When one turns to these objective structure, one does nothing but skews or impoverishes the memory, because the more one objectifies his images of the past, the less he becomes able to experience his subjective selfhood.

Rachel, turning to the scientific explanation of her photograph, start to distrust her memory, her past, therefore her identity. Roland Barthes once wrote that reading time from a photograph is reading from it the most poignant detail that pricks one's vulnerable emotion. In this fictitious example it could be induced that the way a photographs is perceived as a mnemonic device is more direct and sensational than any other linguistic system. Revisiting old photographs and tracing back the personal course of time through them, one cultivates on an ontological level his own memory (with its emotional scars, joys of small achievements, ineffable feelings about small moments, etc.) It is an inimitable way of experiencing personhood, whose signification system operates directly on the corporal perception without recourse to any symbolic means.

- **The laughable pathos**

As an introspective inquisition for self, I set out another video project, "Self-portrait" (spring, 2001). On this project I utilized again the film-noir traits I studied on the previous project for the photographic approach. The

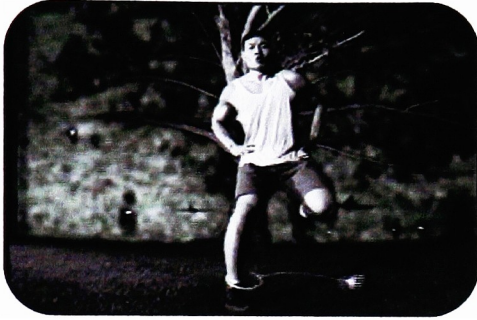


This opening scene doesn't provide a clue about what he is doing.

visual composition consists of the image of myself, some old photographs of mine and the video footage of Korean Warfare that was superimposed on the background. In fades an assiduously grim face, probably too sedulous and rigid to be real. As the scene zooms out, the man with the face is pathetically struggling (keeping one leg jumping over a toy while the other leg is orbiting the toy around himself). What is happening in the scene is quite comical, yet the superimposed background images of warfare didn't make

the situation humorous or farcical. This ironical juxtaposition makes the video even funnier. On the surface of public interest the work is not about humor at all, nonetheless, when zooming onto an individual grain of the

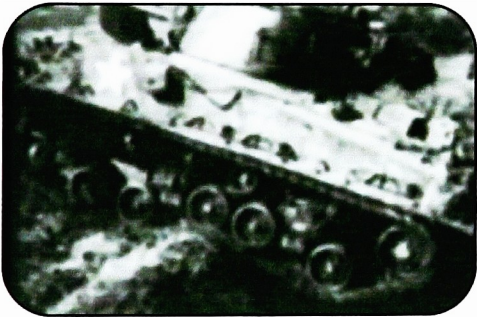
He is out of breath doing what he is doing.



An old family photograph being examined with a magnifier.

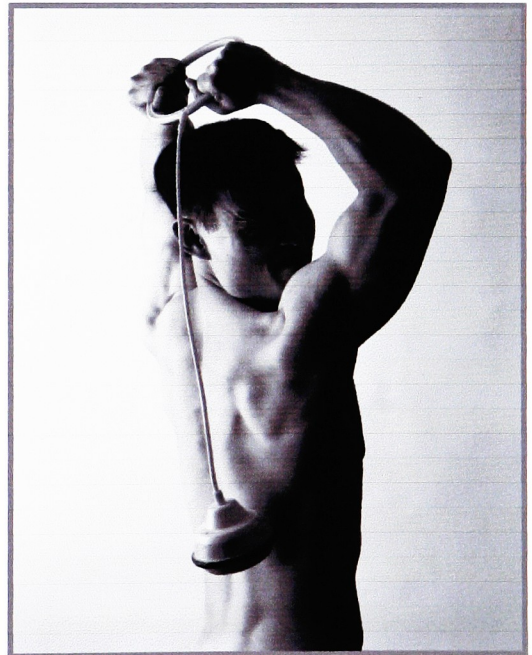
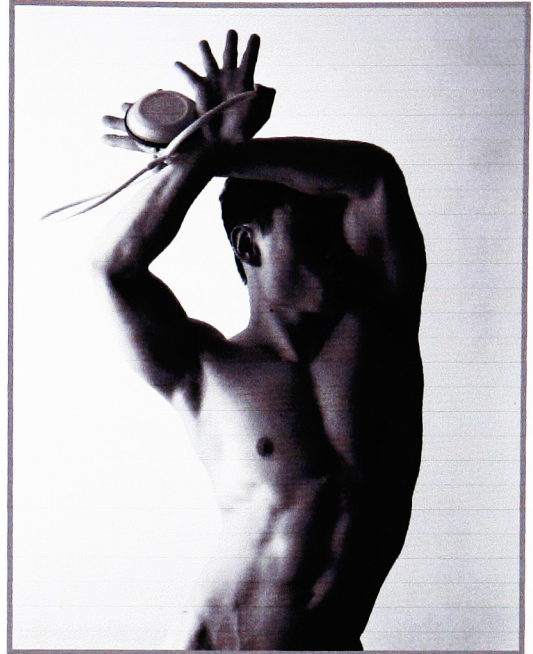
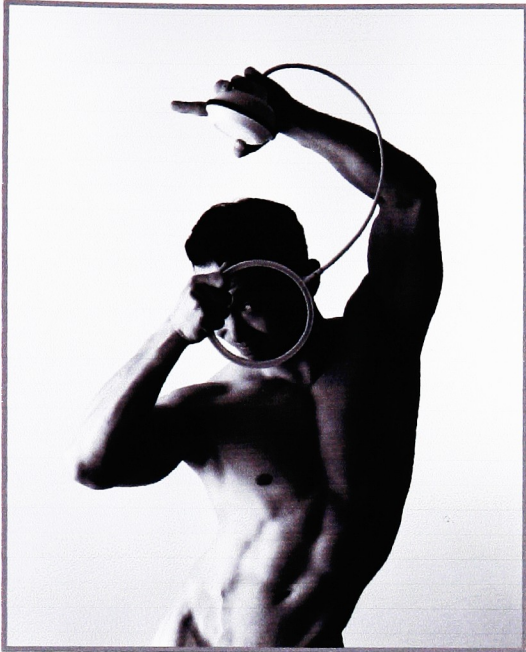


Footage of Korean War as the last scene.



historical event (Korean War), the audience is to experience certain humor as an empathy for the individual' awkward struggling. The humor here, however, is not about entertainment, but rather it bears the quality of understanding. The scene is followed by the blurred images of old photographs, which are examined with a magnifier. Rhetorically, the magnifier signifies a very personal mean for struggling with the emotional wounds left by a particular historical event. Regardless of such sincere struggle to cultivate his identity, it seems impossible for an individual to remain untainted from the ruthless commodification of the western industrial society. As an appendix to the video, I made eight black and white still photographs. Each photograph is a medium shot of self-portrait, posing naked as if a pin-up model. This laughable parody was intended to add a satirical mockery in order to give the work a complex finish.

Even if my two previous works don't seem to be thematically related to the installation, "Understanding photograph A", the foundational context and the stylization of "Understanding photograph A" had been developed, to the substantial extent, in the processes of these two projects.



From the eight images that were added to the video work, self-portrait 15" x 19"

Narrtological aspect of the installation

- **The art practice as a way of narration**

Walter Benjamin in his famous essay, "The work of art in the age of Mechanical reproduction", quotes Paul Valery:

"Our fine arts were developed, their types and uses were established, in times very different from the present, by men whose power of action upon things was insignificant in comparison with ours... In all the arts there is a physical component which can no longer be considered or treated as it used to be, which cannot remain unaffected by our modern knowledge and power..."

Still this quotes lingers unresolved in my mind. Probably it is the most fundamental yet the most formidable question for any art practitioners how to identify fine art within capitalism whose mode of production is

uniformly governed by the rational consciousness of science. Lyotard once put “scientific knowledge does not represent the totality of knowledge,” by which Lyotard implies narrative knowledge (the old, customary form of knowledge). The pattern of knowledge in the time “when fine art were developed” would require very different intellectual praxis than that in today. Its succession was mainly dependent on the transmission of narrative without involving any scientific proof. Since its validation didn’t need any evidential system, it could, in its simplicity, achieve the totality by itself. Fine art is now losing its indigenous ground, it’s suffering from anachronism in the prevalence of scientific knowledge, whose structural clarity only explains fragmentary information about art. In such an unsettled situation our artistic imagination is crippled. Our understanding of art is getting even more nebulous by the advent of political correctness of the multiculturalism, which has been brought by the vibes of postmodernism.

Postmodernism reflects positively every contour of its participants and establishes its grid by juxtaposing each and every individuality side by side. Its aesthetics lies in the panorama of diversity without any distinctive central point. In this social landscape the meta-framework (the total structure that contains and legitimates every single constituents of the system) is growing weak in its command and justice. Lyotard once diagnosed this condition as “incredulity towards meta-narratives.” In order to prevail in such an intricate condition one needs to modify oneself constantly to be comparable as he is situated in different contexts. It seems that one also need to train oneself to endure the isolations caused from such conditions. Postmodern condition has brought about such a psychological state where voyeurism (eyes on others) plays very important role for one’s own identification: no matter how bizarre one may appear, it determines the relative geographical location of another in the grid of its own game. How peculiar

and complex each one appears, postmodernist society has its way to interpret it as a number of human possibilities. In all fairness one could appreciate the range of diversity as the whole under the name of the pluralism, which the rhetoric of postmodernism vindicates. Lacking the narrative knowledge that once strengthened the social bond, today's society often emphasizes superficially the visual effect of its mechanical structure. The museological concern of postmodernism, stressing merely the visual interest of the diversity, brings down any subjective individuality to the equal objective ground. In such a condition everything becomes nothing but an instance of the postmodern possibility. The total showcase of multiculturalism doesn't seem to care much about the cause of indigenous cultures and their sentimentality. It seems to be infatuated only with the displaying effect of the diversity. Conceiving the totality in the postmodern condition becomes so difficult that one readily tends to extend understanding only towards the instrumental aspect of the society.

Today's art in general, I believe, resembles more and more the soft science in order to be parallel with other social apparatus of the capitalism. Even though the establishment of societies today is mainly based on the scientific knowledge, it is my conviction that the function of art should maintain to provide the narrative understating of the human condition. But, can the fine arts today evade the structure of capitalism and the influence of its mode of production? As Marx predicted, the technology and its velocity of production has tamed our imagination and creativity. Technology even has expelled absurdity that used to enable us to think in a simple and total sense outside the rigid and complicated order of reason. Reason is now the most dominant institutional methodology we apply. It has excluded mythology from the history and differentiated alchemy from chemistry, and astrology from astronomy. All the ancient understanding of

human beings and ancient cultural practice have been severed from contemporary culture. The material treat of the science is now the most powerful stimulation to the culture progression.

The abundance of kitsch owes its very existence to the mass production of western industrialism. Generally kitsch is regarded as bad taste or a failed substitute for art. But, if kitsch, bearing no spirit of the artist in a total sense, is just a failure of art, it might be relevant to reckon that the history (utilizing the objective point of view as narrative level) is also a failure of mythology.* In other words it is impotent to pass on the indigenous spirit of the culture down to subsequent generations. Is kitsch the capitalism version of art? Does fine art need the same treatment as mythology, alchemy and astrology? The questions sound all absurd, nevertheless it seems that the conception of art never yields to the lucidity in such a condition. All my personal effort towards understanding art, however, remains in the same track, a track of communication in its totality. It might be merely my limited faculty to conceive any artwork in the form of a narrative, even abstract art that attempts to avoid any plot. Even if it is possible not to have a narrative within the frame of artwork, the process of display always induces a designed access to the work, which I think of as a mode of narrative. In this light, my video and still photographs have always been in my own way of narration. Considering how the display effects would generate the cascade of instances, I planned the narrative

*The formulation of my idea on kitsch is based on reading:

Adorno, Theodor. *The culture industry*. New York: Routledge, 1991.

Calinescu, Matei. *Five Faces of Modernity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1987.

Greenberg, Clement. *The collected Essays and Criticism*. Vol 1; *Avant-guard and Kitsch*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986.

Kulka, Tomas. *Kirsch and Art*. Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University, 1996.

Kundera, Milan. *The Art of the Novel*. New York: Grove Press, 1988.

Norberg-Hodge, Helena. *Ancient Futures*. New York: Sierra Club Books, 1991.

Olalquiaga, Celeste. *The Artificial Kingdom: A Treasury of The Kitsch Experience*. New

structure of "Understanding photograph A"

- **Scene and Action ratio**

In order to build a hierarchy of instances to convey a narrative, I needed to study the media I was dealing with and how media generates modes of expression. To begin with what I had to consider was where the narrative starts and where it ends in terms of its narrative level (the level at which an existent, event, or act of recounting is situated). The narrative level of my particular case was closely related to the space of the installation. As the installation took the conventional gallery space, expecting the customary interplay between the viewer and the artwork, the final narrating instance was of the authority of museum and its established effect (anything in the museum is worth looking as an art work). In other words the museum effect was the metalanguage of the installation. With such a precondition of metalanguage, I sequenced the order of instances so as to create the pseudo-time of the narrative in accordance with the distinctive character of the installation. The deployment of the installation is quintessentially based on the lapse of the time in the movement of the viewer (from the postcard, to the conventional gallery space, to the final video manual). For the sake of the succinct illustration of the narrative, I will use "the five key terms of Dramatism" as defined by Kenneth Burke, (which are act, agent, agency, scene, and purpose). In the story line the agent, who performs the act, was the boy on the postcard. The photograph on the postcard was a foreshadower that introduced the viewer into the plot of the installation. Upon the entrance into the gallery space the viewer is to be given the context (*mise en scene*) of the installation: It can be seen that

the background of the narrative (the scene in Burke's term) is the whole architectural design of the installation. Once the context is given, the movement of the narrative hinges critically on the video work (in Burke's term it is the agency whose instrumental means are used by the agent, the figure in the postcard). Finally, the purpose of the narrative is literal and plain as the title of the installation indicates: to unfold an illustration of how the artist has struggled to understand his relationship with photographs.

In distributing the ratio of these five elements, my main concern was how to develop the interplay between the act and scene whose protocol, I believe, is chiefly governed by the museum effect. Having in mind the maxim that "terrain determines tactics", I looked into the conceptual current of the art world in terms of exhibiting space. In the recent history of the fine art (specifically since 1960s), exhibiting space has been merging with art works into a single situation, breeding such genres as Fluxus, Earth art, Minimalism, video art, Performance art and finally Installation art. Such phenomenon seems to have been cross-fertilized by the theory of structuralism, especially whose understanding that is tied to the relationship between authors and readers. According to Barthes the author's subjectiveness in any symbolic practice gets lost. This vacancy occurs, once the work has been created and the objective system used for the creation begins to exercise its own identify on the body of work. Since the customary use of an objective system is subject to changes according to different social and cultural contexts, the original meaning of author goes through transmutation as it is placed in different temporal or spatial situations. In this sense "the unity of a text lies not in its origin but in its destination."*

When looking in this light at the aspect of "Installation art", it seems to be

* Barthes, Roland. *Image Music Text*. Paris: Hill and Wag, 1977.

relevant to think that creating the situation of the installation isn't simply about conveying artist's intended meaning but about anticipating the consumption the artwork by adding the experience of the viewers to the work. As it has been becoming the duty of artists to count the function of exhibiting space in the aspect of artwork, the viewer's involvement in the situation of art installations has been considered to be "integral to the completion of the art work."* The appearance of the installation, "Understanding photograph A" takes a typical form of conventional exhibition. However, it could be seen from its narrative perspective as Installation art, since the narrative instance has an ephemeral quality. The pseudo-time of the narrative can not be duplicated after the dismantlement of the show (the temporality of the exhibition is the very scene of the narrative). Given that the instance of the gallery space and the viewer's participation works only as a component (the background) to the total narrative, it becomes easier to illustrate how the figure from the postcard plays its act. Along the course of the viewer's movement, the young version of the artist from the postcard starts a quest to gain the understanding of his identity. Here the symbolic meaning of the gallery space is the locus of his psychological exhaustion. The setting of installation represents connotatively the institutional knowledge through which he struggles constantly. Reflecting himself on the institutional knowledge, he finds his identity as fragmented and distorted, which is represented by another photograph of self-portrait, the platinum print. If the photograph on the postcard represents artist's untainted and naive totality, the platinum print, *untitled*, is the symbol of artist's mutated identity: the projection of such fragmented understanding of self has been derived from the idea that objectifying one-

* Reiss, Julie H.. *From Margin to Center: The Spaces of Installation Art*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001.

self is more effective knowledge. Finally on the video (which I personally separate from the gallery setting in terms of its narrating level) the figure from the postcard, claiming as the artists of the installation, concludes his quest for understanding, becoming the very photograph on the postcard. As the final destination of the quest for his identity, the artist chooses his memory over the institutional knowledge. Depriving his own photograph of its symbolic application, he obtained a point at which he didn't have to play any language game over a photograph or his identity. What we finally get at is more immediate and instantaneous realization than any linguistic system can bring. When the figure is getting gradually superimposed on an old photograph, the viewer is to experience the reversal of the narrative: "Understanding photograph A" isn't about symbolic interpretation of a photograph but it is about looking at the temporal mode of our existence through a photograph. The artist doesn't look at the physical attribute of his image but he sees himself as a temporal-being through the photograph. He regains, through the nostalgia and the ineffable pain from it, the subjective selfhood.

In the plot of the installation the viewer's role has been constructed on the two planes: 1. the viewer's engagement in the installation is what moves the progression of narrative (the act of the drama, from its beginning to end, follows the physical movement of the viewer). 2. The viewer in the installation work, at the same time, remains to be the background (the scene) of the narrative. This particular correlation between the act of the narrative and scene (the physical environment of the installation) is the very situation I wanted to create for the installation. Although my description of act-scene ratio of the installation was mainly focused on its division, the purpose of the illustration was to sketch the merging effect of it.

- **Transmittance of human solidarity through a narrative**

It seems possible to say that the notion of “art for art’s sake” provided me with abstract space in which I was able to develop my own story of self, especially in relation to photographs. Upon being engaged in this game, one need in one way or another to come up with one’s own way to construe the human condition in the velocity of the contingent spiraling of our history. But in this cultural landscape it becomes questionable how to recognize one another’s common humanity, since each one develops an idiomatic vocabulary concerning the nature of human essence. Simply situating the understanding of human condition within the scope of relativism, one could gain accessibility to the transparent intelligibility about his connection to other. However, it is only possible at the cost of losing the legitimacy to talk about the absolute quality of human essence. In the relativistic paradigm the validation of one’s idea of humanity requires a certain linguistic precondition. Once an idea is objectified and endowed its relative value in a system of objectification, the idea should be remain in the system in order to maintain its validity.* Going back to the notion of “art for art’s sake” I needed to ask two questions regarding the idea of relativism. One: If the legitimacy of art is independent of any outside symbolic system other than itself, what is “pre-existent Logos” (the source for reasoning) for art?

Seeking answers for such a metaphysical and multi-faceted question, my selfish and extemporaneous attitude was simply to turn to the history of art in order to find instrumental factors that have been distinguishing the practice of art from its mimicry. As a start for this formidable inquiry, I

* Loytard, Jean-Francois. *The Postmodern Condition*. Minneapolis: the University of Minnesota Press, 1973.

looked at the mediational distinction that separates art from its imitation, kitsch. The main focal point I came to concentrate on was the differences in the mode of communication. Once the art work has been created, it becomes a mediator with its own sovereignty; even if no agreement can be expected between the intended original meaning of the author and audience's idiosyncratic interpretation, the circumstantial effect of the mediator is primarily based on a certain corporal human perception. Here any symbolic system entailed is in the service of this direct sensory communication, therefore not valid when it is severed from its first effect, corporal perception. In this light the essence of art lies in a subjective human experience, a full access to which is not possible by a mere objective understanding without provoking a personal remembrance of one's own sensational experience. On the contrary, kitsch has a totally different mode of communication. Its appearance resembles art to the extent that sometimes it requires expert opinions to distinguish. Kitsch doesn't intended to bridge between primordial human perceptions, rather its communicative function is to carry a linguistic abstraction. The creation of kitsch in terms of its purpose is very similar to that of commemorative coins in that it anticipates a certain symbolic value in an already established currency. Upon its creation its validity is determined by whether it effectively carries the devised symbolic meaning to its consumers. Its sovereignty lies in the market dynamics rather than in itself. It has its value as no more than a denominator of a linguistic paradigm. Since any perceptual aspect of kitsch has already been reduced to the symbolic means from the moment of its creation, the process of mediating is purely mechanical and abstract. Talking about its fundamentality without a precondition is not legitimate in the scientific sense.

Formulating the characteristic distinction between art (appealing to

the human essence) and kitsch (satisfying an linguistic interest), I moved on to the next question: how can a narrative gain a symbolically neutral ground where the exercise of human communication can be achieved in an immediate human solidarity? It was a quite dilemma that the use of symbolic system is necessary to create a narrative, yet the installation has been intended to communicate in terms that are immanent in the intrinsic human experience so as to create the emotional intersection with the viewers. The solution to the dilemma seems to lie in the phenomenological understanding of the connection to others. For Merleau-Ponty the unity of subjectivism and objectivism could be obtained by shifting the location of human value from the subjective to the intersubjective "whose unity is found when one either take up his past experiences in those of the present, or other people's in his own."* It is actually merging the subjective with the intersubjective into a single concept, for conceiving one separated from its surrounding, from the perspective of phenomenology, is not possible. the surrounding determines one's mode of existence. In this phenomenological sense what is to be considered most in both creating and approaching artwork is how to be engaged in empathy. The correlative feeling of experience is the binding element of human solidarity. According to Rorty, expanding the sense of human union is possible by separating the question "Do you believe and desire what we believe and desire?" from the question "Are you suffering?" Even if the semantic aspect of the installation is largely autobiographical, its mode of projection has been devised to establish a connection through which unpronounceable texture of life can be shared. For this purpose, personalizing the project is my earnest attitude to communicate with others. In this subjective manner I believed the project

* Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. New York: Routledge Classics, 1962.

was to evoke other's personal experience without resorting to the objectification of individual's experience. What I intended to build through the narrative was not an appeal to the linguistic commensurability that I presupposed exists among individual's peculiar symbolic practices. Yet it was an appeal to the affinity in one another's bodily perception (the living experience). Without this phenomenological consideration, I believe, a symbolic perspective toward the world remains an invalid abstraction. The subplot of installation has been directed to bring into focus a momentary pang of life whose resonance is preserved in more immediate frequency in photographs than any symbolic system. As Merleau-Ponty put it, the basic form of art should be situated in "the unity of consciousness and consciousness". To my understanding this unity is the existential essence that incarnates an enchanting rhythm that animates a life in a molecular chain of lives.

A Narrative over the frame

Depriving photographs of its symbolic appeal in the fine art evokes ambiguity when one interprets photographs. But in an obscure and cloudy reminiscence of a photograph one could retain the traces of his unique course of time that the image has endured. By abandoning the superficial intelligibility, one might be able to experience the rapturous expansion of details of photographs. In this way what can be appreciated from a photograph is not a duplication based upon scientific accuracy but contingent to the whim of the viewer's emotion. I believe it is such contingency that enables an artist to appeal with sympathetic emotion to the human solidarity.

Photographs are direct channels to memory better than any other symbolic means that I know of. One might say that a man's memory is susceptible to the distortion of his past to accommodate his present interests. It all sounds plausible. Yet, my question lingers over such an objective

understanding of memory. For whose sake we remember things or look at photographs? Turning to objective measures, the individual's joys and pains in memories are readily reduced to nothing but linguistic instances. A man's identity doesn't operate merely by the presence of his existence, separated from his past. His authenticity becomes legitimate only when it is acknowledged as the cumulated sum of the time he has lived. One's identity should, therefore, be located on the edge of one's idiosyncratic process to maintain the connection to his past. I believe photographs have the quality to bear personal mnemonic property and its evoking power touches us on the visceral dimension. My mother, barely educated due to the Korean War, never understood what I have been studying (she believes photography is all about operating a camera), oftentimes exhibiting shame on her limitation in educated ideas. Nonetheless she has the sovereign exercise over her photo album; her cultivation of memory through photographs is unparalleled with any of my family members and any one I know of. She always has a more painstaking and lively way with her photographs than me with mine. It took me seven years of institutional education in photography to realize that my mother has all along known how to listen to the nursery rhymes of her photo album.

Sometimes watching my old photographs, I feel caught in a moment of a twinge whose occurrence seems to be estranged from my consciousness; it is an unforeseen corporeal seizer with the facticity of my temporality. Now musing over the photograph absent-minded long enough to be engrossed in trivial details, I become totally passive. And in comes the early April-breeze, agitating the shades of trees on the front yard on whose sterile soil my parents' scanty plan for turfing never succeeded. I am feeling bewitched by the young version of me in the frame, my mind captivated in the lyrical passage to the past. All helpless is my pathetic, rational

endeavor to get over this flawed emotion caused by a small, faded photograph. Strangely, the boy image of me is leading me now outside of the frame, through the pale carnation doorway, to the green door that is situated at the remote corner of my memory where I find myself suspended in a boyish curiosity over why Joni didn't come back.



Works Cited

- Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida*. Paris: Hill and Wag, 1980.
- Barthes, Roland. *Image Music Text*. Paris: Hill and Wag, 1977.
- Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Paris: Hill and Wag, 1957.
- Blade Runner* (1982) Dir. Ridley Scott. Writing credits: Philip K. Dick, Hampton Fancher, David Webb
- Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968.
- Burke, Kenneth. *A Grammar of Motives*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1945.
- Hirsch, Foster. *The Dark Side of The Screen*. California: Da Capo, 1981.
- Loytard, Jean-Francois. *The Postmodern Condition*. Minneapolis: the University of Minnesota Press, 1973.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. New York: Routledge Classics, 1962.
- Reiss, Julie H.. *From Margin to Center: The Spaces of Installation Art*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001.
- Rorty, Richard. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Sontag, Susan. *Against Interpretation*. New York: Picador USA, 1966.

Works Consulted

Adorno, Theodor. *The culture industry*. New York: Routledge, 1991.

Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002.

Calinescu, Matei. *Five Faces of Modernity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1987.

Geertz, Clifford. *Local Knowledge*. New York: Basic Books, 2000.

Greenberg, Clement. *The collected Essays and Criticism. Vol 1; Avant-guard and Kitsch*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986.

Genette, Gerard. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1980.

Karp, Ivan and Lavine, Steven D. (Ed.). 1990. *Exhibiting Cultures: The Museum as a Way of Seeing*. Washington, D.C: Smithsonian Institution.

Kearney, Richard and Rainwater, Mara. (Ed.) 2000. *The Continental Philosophy Reader*. New York: Routledge.

Kulka, Tomas. *Kirsch and Art*. Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University, 1996.

Kundera, Milan. *The Art of the Novel*. New York: Grove Press, 1988.

Levi-Strauss, Claude. *Myth and Meaning*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1995.

Norberg-Hodge, Helena. *Ancient Futures*. New York: Sierra Club Books, 1991.

Olalquiaga, Celeste. *The Artificial Kingdom: A Treasury of The Kitsch Experience*. New York: Pantheon, 1998.

Pmega. Sisama and Landa, Jose Angel Garcia. (Ed.) 1996. *Narratology*. New York: Pearson Education. Inc.

Prather, Marla F. *History of Modern Art*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1998.

Ross, S.D. (Ed.) 1994. *Art and Its Significance: An Anthology of Aesthetic Theory*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. New York: Anchor Books, 1989.

Sontag, Susan. *Styles of Radical Will*. New York: Picador USA, 1966.

Wall, Jeff and Arielle, Pelenc. *Jeff Wall*. London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1996.