

B/W SIGNALS

30.AUG.- 31.OCT.

MUSEUMHEAD

We live in an era of division—across generations, gender, region, class, wealth, political orientation, normalcy versus abnormality, the old versus the cutting-edge, marketable or not, and even the way we mourn, split into what is deemed proper or not. Rash judgments are quickly made, labeling things as wrong or dangerous, often followed by sanctions. Separation and hatred are easily ignited, and unnecessary excuses abound, wasting time on answers we already know to be flawed. Reality, of course, doesn't lend itself to simple conclusions. Reckless division and extremism only make an already harsh reality even more unfortunate.

How can we perceive this reality? How does today's imagery engage with this present moment? Perhaps we are no longer able to epistemologically grasp ourselves or the images that surround us. In a contemporary visual field that resists functioning as a unified system of relationships or meanings, the only certainty may be its inherent uncertainty. From the beginning, it may have been impossible to map our fragmented present in any comprehensive way.

The certainty of “uncertainty” often pushes images to become more indolent and deceptively extreme. Images that claim righteousness flatten the concept of justice, manipulating it both formally and ethically. Aware of their inability to truly be “right,” these images cater to baseless tastes and fleeting sensations, quickly aligning with trends of style and decoration. In more severe cases, distrust in images becomes a driving force, where spectacles that exploit suffering—such as wars or disasters—are used to boost views, leveraging the lives of others to sustain their own relevance. In this context, fact-checking and documentary perspectives morph into the most commercialized forms of testimony and spectacle, favoring intensity over sincerity, and becoming breeding grounds for exploitation, threats, and conspiracy theories.

Photography often epitomizes the contemporary image. It is both the most sought-after and regressive medium for consuming emotion and taste, closely aligned with mass media. More voracious than ever, photography continues to rethink its existence and form, particularly as we move beyond digital transformation and embrace the rapid adoption of AI. At this point, it seems paradoxical that both taking and viewing photographs have become such ordinary, everyday acts, with smartphones constantly in hand—camera flashes as the brightest light dissolving the uncertainty of modern images. These images, captured and reduced in their clearest moments, highlight the time of “decline of experience.”¹ Amid their infinite replication and proliferation, perhaps all we can do is seize existence within the certainty of uncertainty. Even if this is later revealed as flawed, it may still be an effort to engage with opaque moments, rather than seeking transparency.

B/W SIGNALS shows black-and-white photographs by 10 artists: GWON Doyeon, KEUM Hyewon, KIM Chunsoo, KIM Taedong, KIM Hyoyeon, NOH Suntag, LEE Hyunmoo, HONG Jiyoun, HONG Jin-hwon, and HWANG Yezoi. The exhibition critically reexamines the function of dichotomized and polarized images, highlighting the constant movement between these extremes. The subjects and concerns, methods of witnessing and recording, historical contexts, technological strategies, and sensory expressions that these artists engage with are neither unconditionally accepted nor one-sided. Instead, they present marks beyond consensus and bias, urging us to reconsider the multiplicity of beings often denied, diminished, or compartmentalized. The exhibition delves into the inherent nature of photography, as being-in-between (“interfuit”²), asking what effect this has on how we view and experience images in a time when their authenticity has seemingly “declined.”

¹ Georges Didi-Huberman, in *Survival of the Fireflies* (translated by Lia Swope Mitchell, Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2018), speaks not of searchlights or billboards but of faintly glowing images. He discusses the power of imagery to redeem devalued experiences.

² Roland Barthes explores the existential state of photography through the Latin term “interfuit,” which refers to the dual state of being in which the object seen in a photograph was once present (ça-a-été) but is no longer there. For more on this concept, see Roland Barthes, *La Chambre Claire* (1980), pp. 120-121.

In a similar vein, **B/W SIGNALS** explores the interplay between the objectivity and subjectivity of images, critiquing the common conception of photography that tends to emphasize each aspect separately. Is photography truly objective or subjective?³ Confronting this age-old question, the exhibition challenges the traditional dichotomy that separates documentary from art, and truth from fiction. It argues that photographic objectivity can be understood in more nuanced ways, beyond simplistic notions of reality and truth. The exhibition underscores that photographic images, even those depicting clear facts or objects, are inherently complex and potential-laden. It encourages meaning-making and imagination that transcend rigid divisions and constraints. Rather than passively viewing a photograph as merely a fragment of fact, the exhibition invites us to engage with the gaps and differences between incomplete images as dynamic elements. Today, it presents the uncertainty (opacity) of photography as a distinctive material within space and time, and explores its dual existence and alternative objectivity.

The exhibition emphasizes that the image itself must become the ‘object of questioning’ to reveal the real. It reconsiders the so-called photographic and documentary gaze, focusing on individuality and subjective reconstruction. The exhibition is cautious of forms that neutralize the present and obstruct engagement with the image, challenging sterile formats that emphasize documentary and material aspects of photography. Instead, it explores images from new perspectives. A photograph’s meaning is not found in its mere representation of reality or truth, but in the discourse it creates at a specific point in time.⁴ Rather than erasing the photograph’s potential, the exhibition aims to reproduce it, inviting multiple viewpoints and interpretations.

The “transversality” signaled by the exhibition reflects evolving media

³André Bazin, in his “Ontologie de l’image Photographique” (1945-48), defends photography as a medium that achieves a “complete fulfillment” of the goals of “realism” and “representation.” In contrast, Roland Barthes begins his exploration with “those photographs which I was convinced existed for me” as his starting point.

⁴ See, John Tagg, *The Disciplinary Frame: Photographic Truths and the Capture of Meaning* (University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

theory. Until the late 1970s, photographic representation was often perceived through a black-and-white lens. Black-and-white photos were seen as the essence of photography, revealing reality, while color photos were regarded as artificial or commercial. In contrast, today's black-and-white photographs, often captured with digital cameras and subjected to retouching, now appear as contrived and processed as color photos once did. Even black-and-white film and prints, developed in darkrooms, seem unnatural within the digital landscape. What was once considered the most direct representation of reality—colorless and devoid of extraneous information—has now become a symbol of artifice. The black-and-white photographs in this exhibition do not merely recall or adhere to historical forms but instead highlight the parallax and intersection of the medium. Contemporary black-and-white photos, disguised as traditional images, may seem anachronistic, but they embody the specificities of the medium in a novel way. The exhibition explores black-and-white photography not as a defunct form but as an ongoing affirmation and extension of the medium. It examines how both past and present forms coexist and how their distinct characteristics are revealed. This approach represents a continuity rather than an apocalyptic end (or in an apocalyptic continuity), considering the virtual and present aspects of the medium simultaneously.

B/W SIGNALS seeks to transcend the binary logic of black and white, moving beyond mere separation. Instead of participating unconditionally in the spectacle of images, it explores their opaque possibilities, challenging the clear outputs that typically prompt judgment and sympathy. Rather than fixating on the conventional questions of authenticity—such as whether a photograph is real or where and how it was taken—the exhibition emphasizes the underlying potential of images. It embraces the opacity inherent in reality, time, and history as an opportunity to contemplate contemporary existence. Photography is recognized here as something often disguised, inconsistent, and subject to questioning. Black-and-white photographs are presented as vivid manifestations of uncertainty. This approach does not blindly accept photography as a representation of truth nor outright deny its potential; instead, it operates in the space between.

Hito Steyerl's concept of "Einbettung"⁵ illustrates this uncertainty, suggesting that we are all embedded in reality and that the world of uncertainty reveals more than what is immediately visible. The exhibition interprets photographs as moving between belief and doubt within the urgent context of today's images. The black-and-white photographs—objects full of questions—are featured as representations of current reality that defy simple measurement or discussion.

GWON Doyeon's *Nocturama* (2022) unfolds as a series of chases, encounters, and confrontations. The photographs capture scenes of unusual intersections and crossings: wild dogs in Bukhansan Mountain, Redfoxes in Sobaek Mountain, and a herd of Formosan deer in an abandoned house in Suncheon. The presence of these beings—where they are, what they are doing—provokes curiosity. It's fascinating to consider entities that seem out of place, yet seeing them in reality feels almost surreal. The objects and locations in GWON's work possess a blend of the fantastic and the pathological. The incongruity of urban sprawl, interactions between disparate species, abandoned habitats, and unfulfilled aspirations creates a sense of distance and estrangement. The encounters depicted reveal a double irony: a confrontation marked by both antagonism and hybridity. The act of capturing and presenting these images shifts perception and prompts new awakenings.

KEUM Hyewon's *Family Photo* (2018) begins with an old family album, from which the artist rephotographs, retouches, and reconstructs images. Drawing from her maternal grandmother's album—passed from North to South Korea before the Korean War—and her mother's album from the 60s and 70s, KEUM uses Photoshop to erase the people in these photographs, leaving only the backgrounds, objects, and spaces. This process transforms the photographs into remnants of proof, memorials, and events. In *Family Photo*, "taking a picture" becomes an act of looking beyond the temporal and spatial frame, shifting focus towards the boundary between record and imagination. Through these empty spaces and photographs of the past, the

⁵ Hito Steyerl (trans. AHN Kyuchul), *The Color of Truth: Documentary in Art* (Workroom Press, 2019), pp. 13-15; originally in German as *Die Farbe der Wahrheit: Dokumentarismen im Kunstfeld* (Turia + Kant, 2018).

artist reflects on personal histories, projects herself, and envisions alternate narratives. The photograph ceases to be a mere record or memory but rather becomes a pause, a present moment that has not yet arrived, and a backdrop for imaginative possibilities.

KIM Chunsoo's *Ai-mod q 135* (2024) and *Ai-s 105* (2024) delve into the invisible histories of conflicting photographic media. The artist captures AI (Artificial Intelligence) expositions with AI (Automatic Indexing) lenses, a technology once hailed as revolutionary but now largely forgotten. The photographs focus on “thin materials,” such as wrapping paper and tape, found in the corners of the exposition venues, seemingly unrelated to the cutting-edge technology on display. This juxtaposition straddles the line between the need to document facts and the perception of photography as an advanced technological medium. Printed on the exhibition walls like event wrapping paper, the works present only blurry afterimages and optical illusions rather than clear, solid images. As these works will vanish with the exhibition, they embody the paradox of contemporary photography and technology—a futile iteration of both demise and birth, appearing more “thin” than ever.

KIM Taedong's photographs capture a fleeting moment of the day. When the Sungnyemun Gate Korea's National Treasure No.1, one of the eight gates in the fortress wall of old Seoul was engulfed in flames, the artist, who happened to pass by, took pictures as if mesmerized by the scene. These images, taken but never printed until now, are shown for the first time in this exhibition. Created amidst shock and chaos, the photographs no longer point to a specific event or object. Instead, they reveal a parallax—a contourless world of smoke oscillating between past and present, constantly overlapping. By presenting these photographs as a series, KIM emphasizes the difficulty of summarizing or dividing the meaning of a specific event or moment. This work invites viewers to reflect on photography's ambition to capture moments within a broader temporal context, beyond immediate impressions.

KIM Hyoyeon's *My Western America* (2015) delves into the peculiarities of landscape photography and its realization. The artist traveled to the western United States to capture unfamiliar landscapes, only to encounter vistas that she had already seen in Hollywood films and mass media. This journey,

intended to escape familiarity, instead evokes a sense of recoil or awkwardness as an image-photograph transitions into a real-photograph. This uncanny performance of familiarity is reflected in the work, which resembles an ordinary “black and white landscape photograph.” The images appear as though they have been digitally filtered, whitened, and printed in a virtual space, rather than representing a tangible reality. Installed like large billboards in the exhibition space's front yard, the work transforms into a spectacle—a backdrop that amplifies the sense of fake familiarity and unfamiliarity, creating an optical illusion.

NOH Suntag's *Ambiguous Glues #BJI1500* is a series depicting silhouettes of opposition party leaders from the back as they stand on a podium at Daehak-ro, Jongno-gu. These once-vivid figures, captured during intense debates and arguments, now appear in the exhibition as mere black-and-white outlines. The blurred silhouettes, set against a backdrop of vicious counterarguments and the promotion of unfounded division and hatred, highlight the futility and superficiality of extreme thinking and heated debate. The speech scene, visualized through silhouettes, black and white, and layering, reimagines these figures not as immortal heroes but as “ambiguous glue”—entities connecting and separating in a mutable and unstable relationship.

LEE Hyunmoo's *Still Life* (2012-) series may initially seem like a collection of faded, banal still life photographs. However, the artist uses this apparent banality as a means of resetting perception. The work involves photographing the empty spaces behind objects, the objects themselves suspended in air, and their shadows separately, then superimposing these images into a single composition. These seemingly ordinary still life compositions reveal subtle incongruities, such as the separation between objects and their shadows, prompting viewers to reconsider familiar and overlooked everyday items. By exploring the ontological questions of photography—capturing reality as an image—the series deconstructs the objectivity of perception, thought, and experience. Displayed throughout the exhibition as small, thin, and somewhat precariously positioned fragments, the photographs highlight the gap between abstraction and materiality.

HONG Jiyoung's *Dark Room* (2024) series traverses a sequence of days and

moments. In this work, the lesbian couple, their friends and colleagues, and the places and events that accompany them become intricately connected with the artist's daily life. At a time when photography is often seen as unable to capture the essence of life or forge connections, HONG reaffirms the potential for photography to maintain a bond with moments and subjects that are inseparable from herself. The artist describes photography as a "diary"—a record of present practice, akin to collecting images in a dark room and writing on a white sheet of paper. This approach captures scenes that lie between or beyond personal and historical experiences and conventions. The scenes and subjects of today, though sometimes obscured, marginalized, or questioned, are transformed into a unique portrayal of the present, encountered rather than confined to extraordinary surprises.

HONG Jin-hwon's series *Melting Ice Cream - index* (2024) features photographs of restored, water-damaged film from the 1980s democratic uprisings in Korea, open-source footage of American soldiers hunting during the Korean War, and images of the 1986 Space Shuttle Challenger disaster. These photographs which were not taken by the artist reveal a shift in perception that maintains the ontological validity of documentary photography through the act of witnessing and reproducing events. In HONG's practice, the illusion of synchronizing scenes with reality is replaced by the restoration, mutation, and transfer of inherently unstable and dissolving images. This approach goes beyond conventional representation, reexamining the notion of the heroic photograph/image and seeking a new phase. The artist presents photography as a self-reflexive practice, liberated from isolation and paralysis.

HWANG Yezoi presents six portraits that transcend simple depiction. Instead of merely indicating "You" or stating "You look like this," these portraits become events or revelations, blending various symbols. HWANG's approach is more flexible than rigid. The "young males" depicted straddle the line between gender, sexual orientation, generation, and group, suggesting a continuity with the subjects from the artist's earlier "female portraits." These photographs explore and re-symbolize nuanced specifics that go beyond conventional male portraiture. In an era when being

photographed often feels like a chore rather than a privilege, the artist invites viewers to see portraiture as a state of self-projection, pleasure, or disorientation, uncovering a more intimate sense of "you," "me," or "us."

KWON Hyukgue (Chief-Curator, Museumhead)