

BETWEEN VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE – CONCERNING TOMOKO YONEDA Atsuo Yasuda

Evidently a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye- if only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man. (Walter Benjamin) 1

I took my copy of *The Complete Works of Walter Benjamin, Vol.2* down from the bookcase for the first time in a long while. There is a photograph of the author on the back cover. He has a moustache and is resting his head upon his hand, gazing through the lenses of his round glasses, as if deep in thought. I had planned to refer to his *Little History of Photography* and *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* before writing about the photographs of Tomoko Yoneda, but the spectacles I happened to notice him wearing in the photograph form an important motif in Yoneda's work, so I decided to use them as a starting point.

Let us look at *Between Visible and Invisible*. Together with *Scene*, this series that she has been working on intermittently since 1998, can be said to be one of her most famous works. Compositionally, the works all feature the lens of a pair of spectacles in the center of the photograph, focused on a fragment of a letter, manuscript, book or musical score, allowing the viewer to read through it. However, the frame of the lens and the text outside it remain out of focus and indistinct. The majority of these lenses are of the old-fashioned, round variety, and as they are out of focus, we cannot be certain that they actually belong to spectacles; they could just as easily be the lenses of magnifying glasses, telescopes or microscopes. They hint at optical lenses in general.

No matter if it uses the silver halides of film or the data of today's digital cameras, photography relies on a system of optical lenses to capture the image. Before we talk about the history or meaning of photography, we should first consider the influence that the invention of the lens has had upon our lives. It is said that the seventeenth century philosopher, Baruch Spinoza, made his living as a lens grinder and regardless of the veracity of this, it highlights the metaphorical meaning of the lens. In Spinoza's work *Ethica*, he speculates on God and existence in a rational fashion, examining them through the lens of his precise and penetrating intellect. The seventeenth century was also the time when Galileo Galilei carried out

astronomical observations using a telescope. The camera obscura, described as the ancestor of the camera and origin of the camera's name, had been used as a tool to aid artists since the 15th century but from the 16th to 17th centuries it began to be fitted with a lens, making it much more versatile. The invention of the magnifying glass, telescope and microscope made the invisible visible and it is impossible to measure the transformation this made in our knowledge and understanding. On an everyday level, spectacles have permitted many contemporary people to avoid the inconvenience of failing sight-something that I know about from personal experience as somebody who relies on them to see.

The meaning of photography goes beyond this and surely that is something that Benjamin realized. The optical techniques involved in photographing, developing and printing make it possible for the *visible* to take on a concrete form, to be preserved and duplicated in large quantities, thereby transforming the concept of vision. It can be said that photography takes *another* view, one we call objective, and makes it tangible. When discussing the objectivity of photography, it may be possible to use the adjective *grotesque* in both a positive and negative way. The time when we most feel this about the objectivity of photography is probably when we see a photograph of ourselves - for instance, the photograph on our driving licenses, or even more so when we see a photograph of ourselves taken from behind. Self-portraiture has been a popular theme in Western art since the Renaissance, but it is extremely interesting to compare a self-portrait that has been painted from the artist's reflection to one that is created through the eye of the camera.²

In his *Little History of Photography*, Benjamin cites the work of the French photographer Eugene Atget, saying of his photographs of Paris, 'Not for nothing have Atget's photographs been likened to those of the scene of a crime.' He goes on to write, 'But is not every square inch of our cities the scene of a crime? Every passer-by a culprit? Is it not the task of the photographer-descendant of the augurs and haruspices, to reveal guilt and point out the guilty in his pictures?'³ The metaphors of 'scenes of crime' and 'culprit' may seem rather strong, but I think that they are simply a concise way of referring to the objectivity of photography. In actual fact, it was some time after the discovery of photography before photographs were legally recognized as evidence, but as this role as evidence-direct, indirect and even symbolic traces - took root, it created the opportunity for new possibilities in photographic expression. Tomoko Yoneda's first work, *Topographical Analogy* is a series that is very suggestive of 'traces.' This series deals with heat and *wallpaper*, exploring the possibilities of photography from a micro perspective. The move from this to a larger temporal axis in *Between Visible and Invisible* or *Scene* marked a major transformation for her. Although I will not go into the details

here, the traces these portray are not merely spatial, but also temporal, the element of time being of equal importance to that of space in the photographs.

To return to *Between Visible and Invisible*, the spectacles she uses in the photographs are all the actual ones worn by prominent figures from modern history. So far, the series consists of ten works and features Sigmund Freud, Hermann Hesse, James Joyce, Gustav Mahler, Le Corbusier, Junichiro Tanizaki, Mahatma Gandhi, Leon Trotsky and Bertolt Brecht. Benjamin once published a book entitled *Understanding Brecht* and the text that we can see through Brecht's spectacles is the dedication that he wrote inside the copy that he presented to the playwright. Be that as it may, when we, the viewers, look through the lenses of the spectacles these people used while they were still alive, we are able to see a fragment of their actual handwriting or some other text that has strong connections with them. Put another way, we can say that the viewer is able to share the same sight as the owner of the spectacles. We all possess an image of these historical figures, based on our knowledge and education, but when we look through their spectacles, which are extremely personal possessions, we are only able to see a small part of the text and we have to guess the rest. However, in addition to the public persona of these people, who each represent a page of history, these pictures also evoke an image of their private side, their internal conflict, their indecision and their contradictory thoughts. We can use the *visible* material that is seen through the lens as a catalyst to touch upon the *invisible*, including the unfocused background. This may be a way of reconfirming our understanding of history or the relationship between history and mankind. In her other representative work *Scene*, the existence of the individual is not apparent.

Unlike *Between Visible and Invisible* which was shot in black-and-white, this series uses color. All the works present seemingly innocent *scenes* of the countryside, beaches or towns; looked at closely, some appear to be beautiful views of forests or the seashore; there is one that resembles a happy snapshot of the beach, while some depict neglected, desolate or even savage scenes-each of them presents a slightly different nuance. The meaning of this seemingly casual and rambling series immediately becomes clear once the titles are read. All the places depicted in the photographs have been the sites of major historical events that still live in the collective national, racial or social consciousness, such as battlefields from the First or Second World Wars, Despite this, the meaning of the place remains obscure until the title and its helpful but rather simple explanation are read; the contents of the photographs themselves remain intentionally casual. It is common in most places for historical events or those that still live within the memories of the people to be commemorated by some kind of public monument but the views we see in *Scene* have no such memory devices, at least not in

an obvious fashion. Despite this, they remain places that are firmly engraved on history and memory. While the memory devices such as monuments will evoke commoditized, stereotyped or off-the-shelf memories, the casualness of her *Scene* series makes it possible to read all kinds of messages into them. They can be said to reflect the viewer, in other words, the distance between them and the viewer's own history or memories becomes clear. If I were to compare it to *Between Visible and Invisible*, I might say that it makes us aware of the existence of different *spectacles* through which each of us view the world.

In addition to the works described above, this exhibition will also mark the debut of Tomoko Yoneda's latest series, *The Parallel Lives of Others*, which is based on the Sorge espionage affair that took place immediately prior to the outbreak of the Pacific War. I would like you all to read the artist's own explanation of this work that appears in the catalogue when viewing it, but I think it can be said to combine elements of both *Between Visible and Invisible* and *Scene*. Taken in soft focus, thereby hinting at the fact that it occurred in distant past and that memories are no longer clear, the small black-and-white prints have the feel of 19th century photographs, and apparently they were taken using an old, well-used Brownie camera with a dirty lens. The places that she photographs - Tokyo Takarazuka Theater, Ueno Zoo, Heian Jingu Shrine, Nara Park, Kobe Port-were all places that Sorge and his fellow conspirators visited. A theater, historical sites, parks and a port, all of these are multilayered places possessing a history as public places while simultaneously being embedded with the private histories and times of the people who have visited them over the years. To the Japanese viewer, these places will doubtlessly bring to mind more personal memories and experiences than many of the places that were chosen for *Scene*. When we, the viewers, put on our individual spectacles, what will be the message that we read in them? The message to be read into Tomoko Yoneda's work is left to each viewer to decide.

Notes:

1. Walter Benjamin, *Little History of Photography*, 1931
2. For further information on self-portraiture in photography, please refer to the catalogue of the Hara Museum's past exhibition: *The Camera I: Photographic Self-Portraits* (Robert A. Sobieszek & Deborah Irmis / translated by Fuminori Yokoe, Michiko Kasahara and Atsuo Yasuda) Tankosha, Tokyo 1995
3. Walter Benjamin, *Little History of Photography*, 1931