A Walker's Chronicle: Seeing Life and Death through Objects

THESIS

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Abstract

There are many ways to observe our lives. A Walker’s Chronicle: Seeing Life and Death through Objects shows a way to see them through inanimate objects. Since these objects are always situated in some relationship with us, each of them tells a story about an aspect of our lives. For example, street litter discloses what people consume in their daily lives, and manhole covers show how people design their town. They are presented in a way that can call up or draw out the latent beauty and dignity of those objects. These things also serve as a record of my actions: traveling, walking and collecting.
Dedication

This document is dedicated to my wife, Suki Kwon, to my mother, Namhee Choi in Korea, and in the memory of my father, Eulchul Ha.
Acknowledgments

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I would also like to thank Choonsoo Chung for your tremendous help on writing this thesis. You understood my intention and helped me to find the right English words for it. You are the person who has the best command of English and Korean I know of.
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In most of my photographs, I depict inanimate objects rather than persons or other living creatures. Since these objects are always situated in some relationship with us, each of them tells a story about an aspect of our lives.

For example, when I visit an unexplored place, one of the first things I do is to take pictures of manhole covers on the streets. They provide me with a starting point for imagining and understanding the life and culture of the locals. Sometimes, while strolling on an unfamiliar street, I take photos of the litter on the ground. These discarded items are mostly traces of those who live or have lived around that location, so my photos can be said to be a partial record of their daily lives. I have also photographed broken pencils. When I see pencil stubs and broken pencils strewn about the campus, I feel pity, even empathy, for them. They had their day and now are abandoned. So I gather them and take photos of them. I think of this activity as a sort of funeral service. Likewise, when I see a photograph of someone that has been (or would be) used as his or her funeral portrait, I try to imagine and reconstruct, from the portrait itself, some aspects of the person’s life and the culture that has shaped it. I took many such photographs of elderly people, and with those photos I have made what can be called ‘portraits of the portraits.'
In short, I am interested in creating works that contain a narrative of the inanimate objects around us, reflected in my (and my camera's) eyes, and refracted through my own life.

Inanimate objects. Why am I so ‘fixated’ on them despite my abiding interest in people's (animate) lives? First, it’s because of my personal creed about dealing with living people. To create works with people in it, you have to observe him or her very closely. Such observation is often quite invasive and often unethical. Furthermore, to make the resulting picture match your expectations, you are tempted to make demands on that person (like “Do this, do that”) and I regard these demands as authoritarian as well as unnatural. Another reason for my predilection for inanimate objects is that I enjoy using indirect expression in my work. Indirectness can create an artistic tension between the underlying theme and the chosen object, between the photograph(er) and the viewer, and even between different viewers. People looking at my photos of litter, for example, would respond differently depending on their respective memory of the discarded things caught in the picture. (What is life if it’s not a totality of memories of all the people and things you come by?) Tension resides in that possibility of diverse interpretations.

These works, however, should not be considered still-life. My process of creation defies that classification. I’m interested in photographing collections of objects, and my collections follow certain rules, derived from the ideas of conceptual art. For example, when doing the ‘broken pencils’ work (for five years), I only gathered those
I found by chance on the campus. I did not purposely search for abandoned pencils. Nor did I deliberately break them. All the works of mine involve travel, walking, and collecting, each of which deserves fuller explication. But in this paper I will focus on the creation process.
Chapter 2: Traveling – Manhole Covers

I am an avid traveler. I travel to learn the ways of the world, and I travel to feel the world. In Korea, it was in the late 1980s that international travel became popular among average Koreans. I was an art college student then. Just before graduation, during the winter of 1993, I went abroad for the first time. Destination: England, Cologne (Köln), and Paris! It was an eye-opening journey. I marveled at exotic sceneries and works of art that I had only seen and read about in books. To keep a record of my journey, I had myself photographed at famous locations. (Figure 1)

![Figure 1. Hansoo Ha. Travel photos. 1994](image)

After graduation, even while working for a newspaper as an editorial designer, I traveled abroad at least once or twice a year (my record is four times a year). Travels must have gratified some kind of yearning or an existential need that could not be met by other means like books or movies. Those experiences made me more
confident and worldly. Meanwhile, my travel photos kept piling up. Soon I grew bored of typical tourist pictures. I decided that I needed to develop my own travel photo project.

I began with toilet shots. My main focus was on the diverse forms of toilet fixtures (once I jokingly called the project ‘comparative toiletography’). (Figure 2) Another, more ‘philosophical’ point was that images of these sanitation fixtures confront us with one of our basic (and usually deemed basest) human needs and make us soberly think about it. After that, I took pictures of various fire hydrants. (Figure 3) However, I felt that as objects, toilets and fire hydrants are too uniform in design and tend not influenced by the different cultures I was visiting.

![Figure 2. Hansoo Ha. Toilets in Europe. 1996](image)

![Figure 3. Hansoo Ha. Fire Hydrants in Manhattan. 2000](image)

Then I discovered manhole covers. One day in the year 2000, I was walking to work from home. I had just purchased my first digital camera and was carrying it around all the time. While pondering on what to photograph, I noticed a manhole cover at
my feet. Something clicked in my mind and I started to take shots. I photographed every manhole cover in my path. The walk to the office took more than three hours, almost six times the usual time. (Figure 4)

I had always thought a manhole cover was just that: a cover, a functional metal lid for an underground utility vault and not a thing to be savored for its beauty or style. I was dead wrong. It is something to behold. Manhole covers are diversely designed. Ruggedly handsome, many of them are unique artifacts. And most of them carry far more information than we expect them to. In some cases, a city’s size can be estimated from the information inscribed on the manhole covers. Those that bear
the city’s or borough’s or street’s name can even serve as a signpost. From then on, manhole covers have served me as a starting point of my photographic (and cultural) exploration of the countries where I have traveled.

![Figure 5. Hansoo Ha. Be-Se-To (Beijing, Seoul and Tokyo). 2010](image)

Each title of the manhole cover works is the name of the city or the street where the covers were photographed. (Figure 5) The covers are round, square or oval in shape. Each country or city has its own style of making them. In Japan, many manhole covers are topped with the same material as the sidewalk (they are identical in design too), which makes them rather difficult to notice. Some covers are ‘presented’ conspicuously like a museum exhibit.(Figure 6) Such specific traits help me understand the local people and their culture.

![Figure 6. Hansoo Ha. Manhole covers in Japan. 2005](image)
Most of my manhole cover work is done with a light-weight digital camera. I don’t use a digital SLR camera. To focus on the center of the cover, I have to stretch my arms and cannot use the viewfinder; the digital SLR is too cumbersome for that posture. Since the resulting photos have uneven proportions to the sides, Photoshop is used to even the sides out. Compact camera shots have limits in sharpness and resolution, so I have been limited to the size that I can blow up the individual manhole covers, in order to maintain sharpness and resolution. I have combined individual shots in a grid to create a large image.
Chapter 3: Walking – Litter

When I arrive at my destination by plane or by train, I usually walk to my lodgings. I take transportation only when it’s absolutely necessary. Walking is an essential part of my travel mode; I walk eight to ten hours a day. I have been an inveterate walker since I was a kid. When I was seven years old, I went with my mother to a department store by bus. It was ten miles from our house. On the bus I memorized the route and several days later I walked all the way to the store with my friends. It was quite an adventure for us small kids. The following year I went again with my mother to my aunt’s house for an overnight stay. It was much farther away than the department store but I, the brave young explorer-walker, was not to be cowed. By myself I walked to a faraway marketplace I had once visited with my aunt by bus. When I returned several hours later I was severely reprimanded by my mother who had been worried to death.

Walking allows me to quickly familiarize myself with the local geography and leaves a lasting memory of the place. Take Paris. I visited Paris during my first international travel in 1993. I walked around the city every day, marking the streets and tourist spots on the map in my mind. When in 1996 I went there again, I could immediately recall most of the routes.
Another reason why I always prefer walking is its calming effect. I take a walk when I have worries or have something to think about. I take a walk when I’m angry, anxious or nervous. After a rough day at work, a walk back home soothes the bruised spirit. Sometimes I would walk around for hours till I calm down enough to face my life again with confidence. Walking is much like meditation for me.

I discovered that walking while travelling allows me to notice many things I would overlook otherwise. When I thought I was familiar with a street because I once or twice passed through it in a car, the same street takes on an unfamiliar appearance when I walk. I would make new discoveries, get new impressions. My ‘walking’ series reflects these experiences.

‘Columbus to Dayton’ is a horizontally extra-long photograph spanning 392 inches, created by combining 224 photos of litter on the road taken while walking from the Ohio State University in Columbus to my home in Dayton. (Figure 7) The distance
is approximately 75 miles; my walk took four days. I wanted viewers of this work to experience or ‘feel’ that time and distance, so I created a work that cannot be entirely taken in at a single glance. The litter photos were chosen based on their location, color, and form. Each picture features one particular consumer product. If a picture contained an element that offered a glimpse of specific location (like phone numbers with an area code) or time (like the manufacturing or purchasing date on a product) that picture was chosen as well, regardless of form or color. They offer clues to the passage points and the approximate time frame of my journey.

Figure 8. Hansoo Ha. London, Ohio. 2013.
‘London, Ohio’ is made from a group of photos of a beer can taken during my walk in that town. (Figure 8) Thirty pictures were magnified to the same size and then combined through Photoshop. (Figure 9) The resulting image was printed out in a size taller than an average person’s height. It’s an extra-large and extra-precise composite image of a flattened beer can. In this photo, one can notice minute details difficult to discern in a casual observation of your everyday trashed cans: dust gathered on it, specks of dirt, small scratches and the rusted logo print. These details together militate in favor of a different perception of the object, and with this altered perception we can also see the whole environment around us in a new light as we walk. We might even say we discover a new ‘parallel object-world.’

Figure 9. Partial close-up images for London, Ohio.

I chose to take pictures of litter because I have always believed that dumped items (i.e. waste products) bear witness to important aspects of our way of life. After the Second World War, the world economy rapidly grew, ushering in the age of mass
production and consumption. As the theorists of ‘Consumption (or Consumer) Society’ have told us, our capitalist social system can only be sustained through ever-greater consumption of goods and services. Pioneering pop artists, including Andy Warhol, depicted consumer products in their works, and it has become commonplace for contemporary artists to depict consumer products in a two-dimensional image, or in a three-dimensional work of art.

But Warholian images of Coke bottles and Campbell’s soup cans, like consumer products displayed in the store or shown in the commercials, don’t tell us much about individual lives. Such art might reflect on our era but hardly pays attention to the consumer as a person. That is what I hope to do. By observing litter (that is, objects of consumption that have been used and discarded), we can peek into how those ‘litterers’ live. Street litter is a trace left by persons living in that particular area. It reveals their consumption patterns, which is an important aspect of their lives.
Chapter 4: Collecting – Pencils

If traveling-walking is a lifestyle for me, collecting is an instinct of mine. I seem to be incapable of letting go of anything I have. I am an involuntary collector.

For example, no matter how old and worn-out my shoes are, I wear them until they almost disintegrate. (Figure 10) Even when I have to buy a new pair of shoes, I don’t throw the old one away. It is not because I want to collect shoes. It’s because they remind me of the days when I wore them. The shoes are, well, memory-ridden. So are other possessions of mine. Like old photos in an album, they each bear a piece of the story of my life, and emotions well up inside me when I look at them. I suppose this personality trait of mine led to the projects discussed here: choosing material objects as a major subject of my photography; trying to get a perspective on a
person's life through the objects he or she used; collecting things and making photo works out of them.

I don’t collect things like stamps or coins, which are collected for their own sake. Instead I accumulate things obtained and used in my everyday life and travels: receipts, train tickets, travel brochures, school textbooks (from the grade school to the graduate school). While serving in the military as a conscript, I collected certificates authorizing my time off. I also saved all the word processor files of more than a thousand poems I transcribed one a day over three years.

This collecting (or rather accumulating) habit of mine was the decisive factor in creating the ‘Mourning’ series. When I entered grade school, Father said to me, “Take good care of your pencils. They are every student’s constant companion.” Heeding his advice, I never once carelessly threw away a pencil or, for that matter, any other writing tool. Later on, I learned that there was an old Asian phrase (most likely a Chinese one) that says “A writing tool is a scholar’s companion.” Perhaps because of this cultural background, Korean students rarely broke pencils or discarded ones that could still be used. I don’t know about current generations, but at least we didn’t. And I don’t remember finding a discarded pencil on the campus or on the streets while I lived in Korea.

Then I came to the United States in 2007. I found a lot of discarded pencils, especially on the university campus grounds, and I learned that throwing away
pens and pencils was commonplace here. I was shocked. It seems that American students have little regard for their writing instruments, and no emotional connection. Writing instruments are regarded merely as cheap school supplies. I could also see students breaking a pencil with their hands, as if they were very angry with it. I realized that my reverence for writing instruments is one of many culturally conditioned attitudes. Nevertheless, I felt pity and even empathy for those abused pencils. I could not let go of my belief that pencils are our precious, life-long companions. That is, for anybody who uses them. So I thought I would not leave those poor pencils rotting away on the floor or in the dirt. I began to gather and keep them. (Figure 11)

Figure 11. Pencils and Pens that I have collected since 2007

The pencils and pens in my custody kept piling up. At some point, I decided to photograph them. I believe everything, whether natural or man-made, has its own share of beauty that has to be recognized. Even badly mutilated–sometimes disemboweled–pencils deserve that recognition. Although their active life has been cut short and they have been cast away by indifferent owners, they still deserve an appreciation by us of their ‘being’ or ‘having been.’ I thought I would give them their
last rite, and last sacrament. Call it a tribute or homage, or a funeral service if you will. The ‘Mourning’ series serves as all those things. (Figure 12)

The picture is vertically long, about as tall as an average person. The intention is to make the pencil look more like (or closer to) a human being. Magnification usually alters the way we view the object (i.e. the camera’s subject). The mangled pencil now shows its scarred beauty and almost stoic dignity. I borrowed this magnification idea from Claes Oldenburg’s large replicas of everyday objects. Furthermore, it was impossible to produce a large, sharp and clear picture with a single shot. So I took a separate close-up shot of each part of the pencil and combined them into a single image with Photoshop.
Death is inevitable. This undeniable fact acts as a constant spur for me and my work. It spurs me to exert myself while I still can. It tells me to make my brief sojourn on this earth worthwhile. It tempers my greed and vanity. I take the phrases “Memento mori” and “Carpe diem” very seriously.

My choice of art as a career was motivated by my fear of death. When I was going through puberty during high school years, I was very concerned about, almost obsessed with, death. I felt utterly powerless. If I must die and be forgotten, what’s the point of living? I despaired. Then I found one sentence that gave me hope and a purpose: “Ars longa, vita brevis” (Latin for “Art is long, life is short”). Thus encouraged, I lived on to become an art major.

For a long time the subject of death did not directly enter into my work. Rather, ‘life’ or ‘living life’ has been the main subject as shown above: people’s everyday life and culture as perceived through objects that offer a perspective on them. However, as we all know, life/living and death are two sides of the same coin. Each presupposes the other (i.e. each is premised on the other). When talking about inanimate objects, ‘life and death’ is commonly thought of as a metaphorical-analogical expression,
but it has the merit of expanding the boundary of our consciousness and empathy. (Not a few thinkers problematized or raised objections to the traditional division between animate and inanimate beings.) So I see shadows of death on broken and abandoned pencils, and on things thrown away after serving their purposes. The main difference between these pencils and litter is that those pencils’ ‘life’ was cut short before they could fulfill their intended purpose.

In the last work I show here, ‘Portrait of the Deceased: Last image they want to leave’, the central theme is death, and I refer to it through funeral portraits, which are inanimate objects (the photos) depicting animate (human) subjects. (Figure 13)

For nine months in the year 2011-2012, I did volunteer work in Dayton. The work was taking funeral portrait photographs of thirty-three elderly Koreans living there. (A funeral portrait is a painting, a photograph, or other artistic representations of a person to be used for his or her funeral service. In Korea and other Asian countries, no funeral goes without a portrait of the deceased.) They wanted to be prepared,
and wished to leave behind their most recent likeness. Furthermore, because I did the work for free, they could lessen the burden on their children. I retouched the original pictures of them with Photoshop to make the subjects look more youthful. I removed wrinkles and moles, and did what I could to make the eyes look larger. The jaw area was modified to look slimmer. Everyone liked the resulting portrait, but I did not tell them that their photos were touched up with photoshop. In fact, most of my sitters have never heard of photoshop. I lied to them, saying that the photos came out perfect thanks to proper lighting and fine makeup. I told them that they are still youthful, handsome and healthy, and I wished them a long life. Well, I told them a little white lie, and they gladly believed me.

In ‘Portrait of the Deceased: Last image they want to leave’, the original untouched photos and their edited versions are presented together. I placed eighteen pictures of nine individuals in a frame. One frame depicts men in suits, while the other frame presents women in hanbok, traditional Korean dress. This work conveys how Koreans, especially older generations that still retain traditional ritual culture, perceive and prepare for their final rite of passage.
Chapter 6: Historical and theoretical background

My works discussed in this thesis are an extension of the works of Bernd and Hilla Becher. The collaborative duo is famous for their ‘typologies’ which are “photographs of variant examples of a single type of industrial structure” (quoted from the MoMA site). Their photos depicted things similar in shape but individually distinct, such as water towers and blast furnaces. In an analogous way I have produced photographs of manhole covers, pencils and street litter. Bernd and Hilla presented their works in a normal and simple grid, which is also my preference. What sets my works apart from theirs is that their focus was on the industrial architectures/structures fated to disappear over time, while my focus is on the objects that offer a perspective on a person’s daily life and culture.

I consider myself a conceptual artist. Concepts or ideas are integral parts of my work. For example, I follow specific procedures to find an appropriate object to photograph. In the case of abandoned pencils, I only photographed those I came upon while walking on the campus ground. In the case of ‘Traveling’ or ‘Walking’, it is important to understand that ‘taking photographs’ itself was not the purpose of my trips. Rather, I took pictures when the opportunity arose while traveling and walking. This is similar to how conceptual art puts emphasis on the action
and thoughts behind the creation of an artwork, rather than the artwork itself. To conceptual artists, photographing is similar to writing in that it’s a method to represent and record concepts. Therefore the technical sophistication of the photo itself is not very important. It’s like considering the information contained in a piece of writing more valuable than the technical perfection of the prose. However, I try to make my photographs look technically sophisticated too, for I believe that the average viewer thinks first about what he can readily see. If what he sees piques interest, then he will consider what the artist has gone through. For me, technical sophistication serves as an artistic decoy to capture the viewer’s attention.

The methodology of my work is similar to that of ‘postproduction’ expounded by Nicolas Bourriaud. (He says that an ever increasing number of artworks are created on the basis of preexisting works.) I don’t use images created by others, but I often reorganize my own photos and present them in a layout. An example is ‘Portrait of the Deceased.’ It utilizes photos taken by me that served (or ‘exhausted’) its original purpose. I call this method ‘image recycling.’ The term conveys the intention that already-used images, including the countless saved-and-forgotten images on a hard drive, will be recycled to create new works of art.
Chapter 7: Conclusion

The subjects of my work are inanimate things/products frequently seen around us. They are presented in a way that can call up or draw out the latent beauty and dignity of those objects. By showing magnified images of a flattened beer can or a broken pencil that reveal the object’s surface details not easily seen in casual observation, by presenting all kinds of random litter with different forms and colors, and by introducing the diverse and often quite elaborate designs of manhole covers, I tried to induce the viewers to see everyday objects in a new and more appreciative light.

My works are not just still-life photos offering objective beauty of inanimate things. They are in their own way records of (or reports on) human life and culture, of human interaction with material objects. Artistic paradoxes are created when my works try to perceive the animate through the inanimate, perceive persons through things like broken pencils or street litter, and perceive life through funeral portraits and death. Street litter discloses what people consume in their daily lives, and manhole covers show how people decorate their town. These things also serve as a record of my actions: travel, walking and collecting. Activities of mine are in fact the basis of, and integral to, my works of art. My work-related actions follow certain
rules derived from conceptual art. But compared to traditional conceptual artists, I put more emphasis on photographic techniques to make well-crafted photographs.
References


