

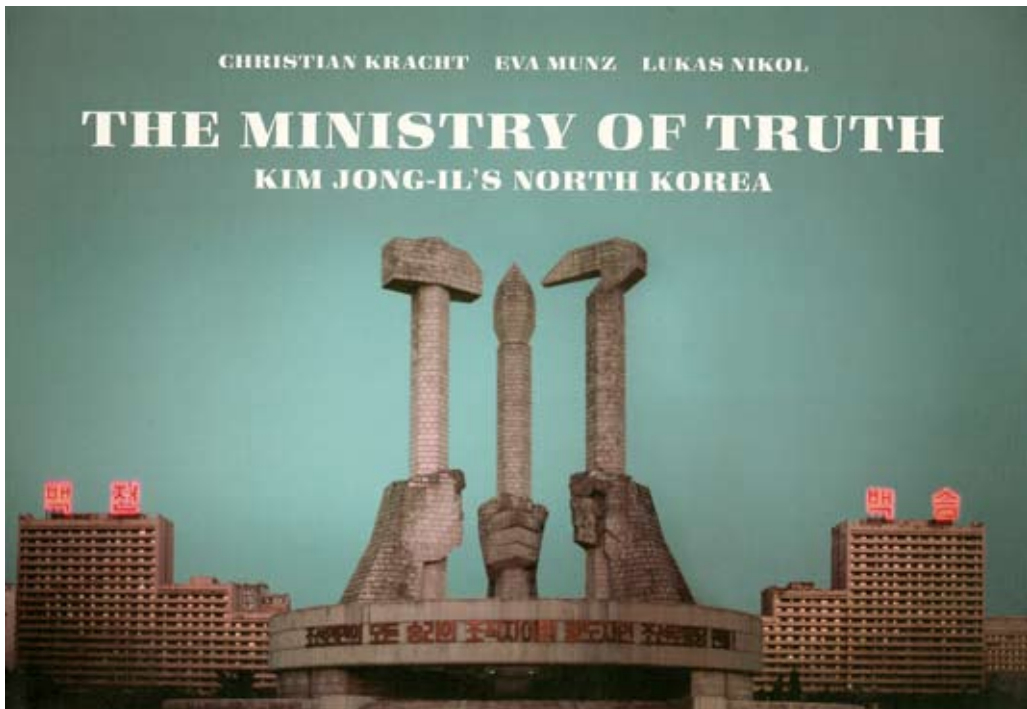
## REVIEW ESSAY

Max Oettli

***The Ministry of Truth: Kim Jong Il's North Korea*  
(text by Christian Kracht,  
photographs by Eva Munz  
and Lukas Nikol):  
Meditations on Control  
and Photography**

(Los Angeles: Feral House, 2007).

It must have been in 1953 or thereabouts. We were living about 15 kilometres from the German border in the northeast of Switzerland. When we went for Sunday walks in the woods, like all good Swiss families, we would see a series of bunkers from the recent war. Some of the bunkers down near Lake Constance were cutely disguised as holiday homes, real geraniums flowering in the window boxes of carefully painted-on windows. In front of them stretched neatly laid-out barbed wire, with signs in pictograms and three languages declaring that photography was strictly *verboden*.



We are ultimately never free to photograph as we will. There are laws, constraints and regulations. I've just been hauled into the local printers – it seems one of my pictures in a book is obscene. We know the story of picture management in the first Iraqi invasion by the Americans, the farce of the US Marines' Somaliland landings – even Joe Rosenthal's Iwo Jima photograph was (wrongly) accused of being a set-up job.

So, another personal anecdote:

Back in 1969 I was invited by a fellow student to meet her father, Gregor Riethmaier. A German immigrant who had settled here before the Second World War,<sup>1</sup> he was the Auckland photographer for the National Publicity Studio and had a rich and interesting list of publications to his name. In my youthful arrogance I swallowed my disapproval of his direct flash on Rollei technique. We spoke of this and that and he showed me a list of instructions for photography deemed to be acceptable for government publicity. I remember a few of the items by heart:

- no tin roofs
- no cars older than ten years, unless vintage cars
- Māori only in clean street clothes or native dress
- alcoholic beverages only to be placed on tables with glasses

Yes, Riethmaier's country of origin had a similar, albeit somewhat more strictly enforced, code of photography when he left there in 1937, more *Wandervogel* than refugee let it be said.

So, to this book, our exhibit "B" of directed photography: Three Germans, a writer and two photographers, took a trip to North Korea, that odd and hermetic country, and it seems the two photographers worked there by conforming very strictly, to the letter, to what their interpreter/guide let them photograph.

The title in German is "Total Recall," a reference one supposes to Paul Verhoeven's film, and the central idea of that violent film is one of a virtual holiday. The culmination – the famous white-out in that rather unwatchable work – may be a lobotomy. Keep talking, father Kim...

Whoever thought of the Orwellian title for the English-language version was a tiny genius, and the work sits perfectly in the world of Winston Smith.<sup>2</sup> In the Peoples' Republic of Korea we are in a country which Christian Kracht, the writer, compares to a film set. Nothing is real, even the visit to the legendary and beautiful Pyongyang subway – which outmoscows Moscow's amazing Stalinist fantasy underworld – which seems to be running purely as a scenographic touristic version. The trains are second-hand from the old GDR, a model called *Gisela*, Kracht writes, reciting its specifications. He himself probably rattled to college in one a few decades ago.

So of course we come to another resonance. Germany had a weird totalitarian socialist paradise as a part of itself from 1947 to 1989, probably embracing the generation of our three protagonists. They built pretty good rolling stock, by any standards.

And Kracht's text bounces off vigorously from the two Korea visit texts of his compatriot, the 'frumpish' writer and ex-Nazi prisoner, Luise Rinser. She was there twice two decades earlier, and seems to have been totally taken in by the scenography in place around Kim Il Sung, the Stalinist dad of the rather curious pudgy offspring who now runs the place according to a weird doctrine of socialist nationalism – if we call it National Socialism we are close to the truth but even more uncomfortable – known as JuChe. In fairness Rinser, a distinguished Christian Socialist writer, would have been there at the bitter end of a very interesting period of

political contestation in the Federal Republic (the wall still had seven years to stand), when there were the first very heated and divisive debates in the Green Left movement in which she was highly placed.

I rather clearly remember a number of pals who went to China in the late 60s and came back with some pretty exciting tales about Ol' Chairam Mao's revolution. I was pretty impressed and these travelling fellows told amazing stories of the rosy utopia they had experienced. At the time I was also doing meticulous photographic copies of small sections of exquisitely detailed gravures in the magazine – smiling peasant faces and visiting delegations from Tanzania, Kansas or India. Never did finish that project.

Kracht's interesting and provocative text rolls out Lacan at the very start of his article. Jacques Lacan ... what does that sinister old clown have to say here? Well, he uses the term *aphanasis* in the Lacanian sense, as a kind of annihilation of the subject in front of its object. Definitely not very sexy ... He's talking about our imagined North Korea in the absence of a real referent. It is true, especially for us on our remote island, that all visions of 'overseas' is channelled, and it is the more so for a country as remote and hermetic as the Northern republic.

But isn't that true of all travel writing since Marco Polo at least, and when we read Calvino's take on that remarkable traveller and teller of tall tales confronting Kubla Khan<sup>3</sup> we get the feeling that the tale is far more interesting than the referent, as uncle Jacques would shout from his Sorbonne lectern in a dusty, smoky lecture hall.

Kracht doesn't actually specify what the book's reviewers seem to be picking up<sup>4</sup> – we are definitely on a mission of compliance here, looking very carefully at the stuff the North Koreans want to show us. JuChe.

The photographs ... are familiar – the wide, almost empty grey streets of the capital, the vivid colours of the militaristic propaganda murals, the showcase underground system and a well drilled populace polishing and rehearsing. But the fact that these same subjects are photographed again and again is entirely the point. Their familiarity is bred by constraint. It is difficult to take any other sort of photo in North Korea.

Jonathan Watts, whom I quote above, expresses rather well the initial reaction the book gives us, and at that level the work is an interesting enough conversation piece on the subject of control and censorship.

So, we can start by looking at it at that level, as a book of pictures which should fulfil some of our pre-programmed ideological expectations, much as a coffee table book of this country would have us expecting Mitre Peak, a rugby match or a picturesque corner of te Aro or Grey Lynn showing just how photogenic corrugated iron can be.

So, let us inspect photos of Korea, the Peoples' Republic: Some of the light is so crappy (you'd get that in Northern Europe, too) that the colour corrector must have had a nightmare not making the stuff scoot into magenta in the grey areas.

My temptation there would have been to go monochrome for clarity and, in the context of the book, to get the feeling through like that. Much like Cartier-Bresson did when he went to the Soviet Union in 1956.

But this is not that kind of book.

One or two of the otherwise splendid underground pictures are so blurred that they give me the irritated reaction that tripods are also forbidden in Kim's utopia.

Exception made for the gloriously clunky support under comrade Kim's Mickey Mouse movie camera on page 19. It looks like a fitting for a 1940s naval gunsight. Still trying



to work out how the get the bugger to pan ... Ah, got it now. There's a worm wheel with a crank handle presumably. Maybe Koreans like juddery panoramiques, or in their cultural isolation they have been indoctrinated to think that pans are always juddery. The photo is obviously a reproduction from a wall poster, and we can situate it in time around 1970 by the presence of a somewhat bemused looking Zhou en Lai in the background and by the Angénieux (or Kern?) state of the art zoom lens on the clunky camera's c-mount.

More tripods on opposing pages. One with another Mickey Mouse camera (newsreel 16mm maybe?) depicted on the mosaic on the left, Soviet Union of about the same period, would double as a theodolite stand. Similar panning mechanism keeping one of the suited cameraman's hands busy while the

other one grabs a probably quite effective tilt handle. Who's working on focus, zoom, iris? Whar dat Korean best boy gone??

Across the page, on a real for once – the others are respectively a repro and a picture of a mosaic: we'll come back to that – a video team is doing an interview shoot in front of a public building. Oops ... now that's a fine Italian tripod, Manfrotto of Bassano del Grappa, with a hydraulic pan tilt head, crowned by a Sony HDV.

Brand names are so rare that they intrude, as they must disturb the weird life in ol' utopia. Here we're looking at some kind of procession with a cast of thousands and some kind of surreal float sliding across the screen in vintage constructivist style. On a JVC TV in a hotel room.



Not all pictures should be read like that, of course, but we are often drawn towards a technological reading.

Take the more or less axial photo of a crossing on an empty boulevard (!) which impresses us by the columns of pedestrians crossing at zebra crossings at 200m intervals. Then the punctum – Mr Gates' Microsoft spellchecker won't allow that word, suggests 'punter', even 'bunkum'; control is everywhere and straight is the Gates – suddenly locks in. The only saloon car, a maybe 15-year-old Jap, is in a completely illegal position. It should be behind the pointsman in the foreground, going round the roundabout if it was to go straight ahead or turn left after rounding the cop. Instead it's turned left, right across the multi-lane carriageway and in any other country would have three columns of cars against it. There is a delightful shade of utopia in good and conforming pedestrians and the anarchic car.

The other punktumette, I suppose – sorry Barthes or Nabokov or whoever – would be the girl in yellow serenely wandering in the boulevard, with bicycles briskly wobbling by to either side of her. Call the cops or what??

Monuments in Korea look 50s soviet; architects must have come from East Germany or maybe Bulgaria. That unmistakeable solidity and consistency of structural vocabulary. Not that far removed, actually, from the suburbs of the European city I've lived in for three decades, now patrolled by riot police on hot summer nights. Le Corbusier rules, OK. More control.

Corbusier, who wrote somewhere: "The despot is not a man. It is the...*correct, realistic, exact plan*...that will provide your solution once the problem has been posed clearly.... *This plan has been drawn up well away from ...the cries of the electorate or the laments of society's victims*. It has been drawn up by serene and lucid minds."<sup>5</sup>

Sounds a bit like father Kim or his boy. The result, I rather unfairly add with Tom Wolfe, is visible in the grimmer *banlieux* of Paris, Lyon or Marseilles. Control.

Some of the older stuff has interesting formal qualities that would hearken back to Vienna or Berlin in the 1920s. It looks in pretty bad repair, though. Will be an enormous waste of heating oil or, more likely, damned chilly in impoverished Korea's severe winter.

Photography is appropriation, and the only syntactical clue we have when Munz and Nikol rephotograph images is a lack of sharpness (they obviously weren't carrying a macro lens) and occasionally the hint of back-reflexion or a gutter in a double-page photo, in one case, retouched out. Now who is fooling whom?

The book mostly speaks the unmistakeable language of good-quality digital. Well and consistently used, colour balances intelligently set, the sensitivity scale allowing for a maximum signal without too much noise creeping in.

It occasionally allows for quick and often poignant Cartier-Bresson-type shots – take the three guys resting on the median, almost certainly shot from a taxi or a bus. Or the tired uniformed girl with her little red sign in front of a mural of smiling people wandering through a green and blue-skied countryside, complete with multicoloured banners and tractors – good Stalinist stuff. It allows for the four beautifully controlled chairs in a hotel lobby, lit by some crazed suicidal fluo tube lazily eating up its vestigial coating and showering everything with a toxic green band of wavelengths.

It also irritates us with evidence of camera shake (back to the tripods – see amply above) and with the lack of sharpness that some of the shots seem to have due to optical reasons, given the mediocre quality of most

digital reflex zoom lenses. (Why can't the lazy buggers make decent glasses? They can, oh yes indeed, but they're too expensive to make and the market doesn't really twig. Same thing happened in the 35mm market for four decades.)

The book is well designed, and competently (but not overwhelmingly) well printed; the images do not really ask for a higher qualitative level. They make their statements, they ask their questions quite adequately at the level they are shown at, and the book is probably designed for a different market than the traditional coffee table. Or maybe the coffee table market has a budget class as well.

This picture book is an interesting example of a strategy which, one supposes, most regimes, totalitarian or not, apply. Some things are visible and to be shown, others are to be hidden – to be implied, perhaps, or to be somehow alluded to.

In *Le Commissariat aux Archives* (The Commissariat in the Archives), a catalogue of an exhibition at the City Museum in Paris on the manipulation of photographs by totalitarian regimes,<sup>6</sup> Alain Jaubert lovingly catalogues different techniques used by photographers and regimes in those innocent pre-Photoshop days to make photographs lie: He mentions retouching, cutting out, reframing, eliminating and airbrushing.

Jaubert's book has splendid examples of the fictionalisation of the life of Lenin, the elimination of embarrassing personages on group photos with despots, be they Hitler or Stalin, the amazing efforts to cut out undesirables on the May Day photos at the Kremlin. It also, incidentally, shows manipulation of riot photos from May 1968, both by the police and by the rioting left.

Yet Jaubert seems innocent of the idea of the 'photo opportunity', the actual setting up of an artificial situation in which all the visible elements are organised in a scenario which will correspond to the ideological message which is to be transmitted. Politicians kissing babies, a smiling uncle Adolf Hitler surrounded by cute blond children photographed by Hoffman – all are examples of photo opportunities. JFK was the first US president to have a personal photographer in his entourage – who, one assumes, had time off when the master was philandering.

So Munz and Nikol are essentially confronting a series of 'photo opportunities' and the ironic juxtaposition of their 'own' work with that by the artists and photographers whose work they reproduce is a logical part of this strategy.

Nevertheless, when we remember the German title, "Total Recall," another component of the book comes to light. We must remember that Germany had an enclave of Marxism in the DRG which culminated only with the fall of the wall in 1989. So, significantly, the book is also recalling the drabness and isolation and occasional repression, one supposes, of the old Communist bloc in Europe. A fine recent German film, *The Life of Others*, gave what looked like a fair portrait of that era of recent history when the state exercised some clumsy form of ideological control over its citizens, spied on them and tried to restrict their artistic and even affective lives, against a chill background of drabness and dubious love.

The book's text quite specifically locks into this spying phenomenon. Kracht writes of visiting a film studio where a scene was being rehearsed:

It was exactly like a real movie. But when we looked closer we noticed that the camera cable was unplugged...Later that evening

we turned on the television to find none other than ourselves on the screen. There we were on North Korean Television...we had secretly been filmed. A media Moebius strip revealed itself from which we still yet have to free ourselves completely. We had become part of the projection.

This is interesting, although we should juxtapose it with the incredibly widespread use of surveillance cameras in our bloated world, where we are being 'secretly filmed' to a staggering extent. My distinguished colleague Ali Bramwell would refer to Kracht's reaction to this Western commonplace as 'ideological confusion.'

This, naturally ties back ideologically to Germany, also overloaded by history, which had also been essentially a divided country, and one which was reunited with a similar clashing of two mythologies and the repression of one (socialism) in favour of aggressive Western capitalism. The rejoicing over this unification was somewhat muted by the social, financial and political costs that struck the 'ossies' when the chill wind of Western enterprise and greed hit them.

So, possibly the text of the book might be considered a somewhat simplistic one in its ideological content, although the problems it outlines are profiled in an interesting and provocative manner which can easily be extrapolated. The imagery and presentation of the book lends itself well to a reading which goes beyond a simple travel book, and asks questions about the accessibility to images, and the actual use made of pictures in any situation which is ideologically charged (and what situation isn't?) to attempt to channel our thoughts and make us conform.

Kim Jong Il's occasionally Polonian texts on film, published in extracts throughout the book, might provide an apt close to this article:

Everyone lives in specific social surroundings in a definite period of history; he is both influenced by surroundings and at the same time reshapes them according to his own ideals and requirements ... This is clearly indicated by the fact that even people who live in the same period and under the same social system each construct their surroundings in their own way.

A happy ending I suppose, as Brecht would say, gimlet-eyed, ironic.

- 1 See *Out of the Shadow of War: The German Connection with New Zealand in the Twentieth Century*, ed. James Bade (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1998), 218-22 for an excellent profile on this remarkable and adventurous man who arrived here as one of Count von Luckner's *Seeteufel* crew in 1937.
- 2 George Orwell's *1984* is a very fine piece of futuristic writing where the world has become a series of grim totalitarian blocs; in Oceania (UK) all information is manipulated and managed by the Ministry of Truth.
- 3 Italo Calvino, *La Città Invisibile* (Turin: Giulio Einaudi Editore, 1972).
- 4 Notably Jonathan Watts' review in the *Manchester Guardian*, 15 January 2008, "For Your Eyes Only".
- 5 Quoted by Tom Wolfe, *From Bauhaus to Our House* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981).
- 6 Alain Jaubert, *Le Commissariat aux Archives: Les Photos qui Falsifient l'Histoire* (Paris: Éd. Bernard Barrault, 1986).

**Max Oettli** lived in New Zealand for 20 years. He studied at the University of Auckland and taught at Elam School of Fine Arts. He was an important New Zealand photographer in the 1969-75 period and then spent 32 years in Geneva, teaching mainly Architecture students. He returned to New Zealand in 2007 and is now Principal Lecturer in Photography at the Otago Polytechnic School of Art in Dunedin, New Zealand.