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# Matjaž Tančič x 3DPRK: 3DPRK: Portraits From North Korea

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## Artist's Statement

"I was born in Yugoslavia, in a formerly communist country that no longer exists. The first time I ever travelled abroad by myself was to Cuba, and, after that, Russia. I've now lived in China for the last three years, and my most recent project – 3DPRK – took me to North Korea. Most people know these countries almost entirely as clichés. We only picture the people there as those on the wrong end of the rifle in Hollywood movies, or through short distillations of suffering and aggression in newspapers.

"The further away the country is, in terms of geography and culture, the greater the mistrust and misunderstanding of its people. The media's particular focus on North Korea also ends up obscuring the people who live there, until the only Koreans we see in the papers are identical marching soldiers. When I was invited by Koryo Studio to work in North Korea, I didn't want to tell the same story you always see on TV.

"The decision to use 3D photography was an important part of my reaction to that — an attempt to get as close as possible to the individuals I met. Too often, North Korea is discussed in overly simplified terms of nameless groups and faceless masses. I wanted to go to the other extreme, to completely single people out, ignoring the masses, while giving these individuals face and personality; with 3D you get as close as possible, so close it's as if you're entering into their personal space.

"Portrayals of North Korea tend to veer into extremes: sensationalistic demonization on one side, or ungrounded idealization on the other; both erase the actual human beings who live there. Instead of this, I wanted to focus on the group that forms the core of every society – people; of different ages, statuses and occupations, and that anyone, anywhere, could identify with. It seemed simple, but it quickly became clear why there aren't many similar projects around.

"With every posed portrait there is a need to build trust through an exchange. Despite common mistrust and the language barrier, we managed to build that bridge between us. The help of a translator, and even interested onlookers, allowed me to bypass the more commonly experienced relationship between Western photographers in North Korea and the photographed, typified by a lack of direct interaction or explanation.

"Among the more than 100 portraits taken for this project, there is a boxer learning to ice skate, a student painting in the forest, and a worker in a steel complex. They're the people the world ignores because they neither fit into the domestic propaganda of a mighty, triumphant North Korea, nor into the international image of a country only to be castigated for its crimes or mocked for its poverty. Leaving this dichotomy entirely, all I seek to do is present the actual people I met in North Korea." Matjaž Tančič

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## Notes From 3DPRK's Producer

"One of our North Korean guides was asked to act as a technical assistant, which involved learning how to operate the flash; he took to the task with gusto and a hint of swagger, proud of his new knowledge. The guide would explain the process in detail to the subjects, whose instinct was to dart off as soon as the first flash went.

"There were, of course, many moments off-camera that exposed something of the real nature of life in North Korea. An older man working on a farm took off his jacket as soon as his photograph was taken, and visibly relaxed. 'Can I capture one of him like this?' Matjaž implored to our guide. 'No, no,' was the response, 'it is too shameful to be photographed without a uniform, he would not want it; let's go.'

"Nervous subjects giggled and squirmed while the process was explained, then the camera was ready and the smile often disappeared. Passersby considered our team with curiosity, or suspicion; others with an eagerness to take part. We gradually established a rhythm over the ten-day shoot. The guides encouraged a swift process, not wanting the attention; Tančič, keen to capture as much as possible, worked as fast as they would let him." Vicky Mohieddeen, Koryo Studio