

## **The Narrator's Potentiality in the Work of Art**

Hyunjin Sin

### **Artist's Experience, Artist's Memory**

The term "386 Generation" refers to the age group of people in Korea, who were born in the 1960s, went to college in the 1980s, and spent their thirties in the 1990s. This is the generation that also experienced simultaneously the government's growth driven program of industrialization and the poverty of the 1970s. They experienced the process of democratization, relative prosperity, and the consequential gap of the haves and have-nots that emerged in the following two decades. Belonged to the very end of this generation, artist Wolsik Kim recalls his own personal as well as pan-nationalist life, and *Dagijoa No. 10* is a product of this memory. It seems that there was a time when the artist identified himself with the mentality and culture of those non-mainstream residents living in his neighborhood of Indeokwon in the margin of Seoul. He was not an alleged star artist. Nor could he afford to do studies overseas, which so many of his generation had done, because he did not come from a well-off household. For these reasons, he led a life as a peripheral, impoverished artist, who spent days drinking soju, with the owners of neighborhood restaurants and other mom-and-pop stores. These friends often teased him calling him a conman as they talking about art. Now entering his forties, he says that he once swore that he would "remain as a small town artist."

A man he befriended around this time once worked for KFC. Although he was an almost legendarily successful employee in the company, he ended up quitting, feeling that he didn't have sufficient connections as a non-college-educated graduate of a vocational high school. And now opened his own a franchised fried chicken restaurant called "Dagijoa" ("I like chicken"). The boss stole the seemingly "high-quality" taste of the American fast food franchise, created his own "Dagijoa" recipe. This recipe aims to serve his neighbor residents to enjoy this seemingly high quality taste in local, humble restaurant. Now he enjoys the second success of owning nine chain stores in Anyang, a satellite city located south of Seoul. While Dagijoa restaurants maintain the characteristics of neighborhood beer joints, it is proudly said that the interior of each branch reflects its owner's personal preferences, which are implemented by a local interior design specialist officially appointed by the franchise.

### **Kim Wolsik's Technique of Memory**

In their book, *Spark of Genius*, Robert and Michele Root-Berstein discuss "creative thinking." The book defines such thinking as realization of concepts borne out of instinct, feeling, and emotion and further lists thirteen thinking tools (observing, imaging, abstracting, recognizing patterns, analogizing, body thinking, empathizing, dimensional

thinking, modeling, playing, transforming, and synthesizing). Kim's most proactively creative thinking begins with corporeal observation. First, he identifies with the lives of Indeokwon residents. This isn't difficult because they share same economic conditions and also belong to the same 386 Generation. Kim often discusses and thinks together with them. How did the owner of the chicken restaurant franchise end up in such a peripheral town? Where do they find their pride, and what do they see and enjoy? Do the cultures that entertain them have values or not? Do they alienate or are they alienated by the so-called development code? Are they second-class citizens? What can art do here and which side is it on? While *Spark of Genius* deals with various kinds of thinking tool in art making process as this exhibition does, the discussion in the book remains at the level of the birth of thinking. I am curious as to what the points of negotiation might be between when thinking is generated and the physical state when work is installed.

It appears that before *Dagijoa No. 10*, Kim thought of his role as comforting the disenfranchised and exposing the social problems that cause this alienation—almost like Hong Gil-dong (a protagonist in a well-known late 16th/early 17th-century Korean novel, who is an advocate for the poor, in the style of Robin Hood). In another work, *Honor, Freedom, Paradise*, the artist collaborates with some of the local residents of his small town, who receive no artistic benefits despite being taxpayers like anybody else; using a public fund he received from a cultural foundation, he made a trophy for his collaborators and purchased objects originally owned by them. Bravo! How gratifying! In *Dagijoa No. 10*, however, the artist is not a chivalrous thief but rather assumes the two personae of a sly middle-aged man and an intellectual, providing narrative voices of multiple characters. Kim, when he takes role of the sly middle-aged man, convinces the boss, his drinking buddy, to contribute some of the objects the latter chose with his own aesthetic pride—such as a romantic model of a sail ship made with copper and wall treatments imitating a classical western style—to his own artistic project. The objects of interior decoration proffered here reveal the cultural codes of the flunkeyism of Korean middle class that blindly romanticizes the west. Furthermore, Kim relocated the food, which mixed tastes of American fast food and Korean junk food—into the space of fine art. And the *Dagijoa* chicken, neither American nor Korean, functions as a standard with which to measure how much today's Korea has become westernized. Through the incorporation of these two elements, the artist's logic asks viewers to question if the distinction between low brow and high culture is no more than difference in the degree of westernization, and in that light, the artist functions as the narrator per an activist-intellectual. The personality, produced by two personae—again, a sly middle-aged man of a peripheral city and an intellectual—is that of storyteller's as her sincerely praises the tacky codes of the boss of a fried chicken franchise in a marginal town and narrates this as an exemplar of the standard Korean culture, thus importing the boss's aesthetic sensibilities as they are into the gallery.

## **Potentialities**

The aforementioned kind of neighborhood chicken restaurants and beer joints are found when one leaves downtown office building areas and glittering entertainment districts and gets off the bus near his/her home. The interior decorations and objects seen in such places embody tackiness itself, which is a product of poverty and ignorance, and being non-classical and kitschy, can also work as a subject that intentionally draws certain snobbery from viewers. In addition, Kim designed an official delivery car for the Dagijoa franchise, haphazardly placing cardboard boxes on top of a cart and plastering them with brown duct tapes. The artist must have spent quite a lot of money, but it utilizes too simple, an almost pathetic method of construction to be called an art object, befitting instead a kid's school project. Might not this monumental sculpture inside the white cube of a gallery be all that different from a fat neighbor lady dressed in a knock-off brand-name suit and in belabored makeup in a chic café in the posh Apgujeong-dong area? If viewers feel that this work is humorous, it is because they could recognize the tackiness of its visual imagery. In addition, it is also because they could lovingly look at the culture established by the 386 Generation, which is playing a leading role in current middle-class economy, in margins like Indeokwon and could interpret the artist's gesture of praising the cheesiness as a wit. And if viewers sense both intellect and humor in the work, it also means that they were able to read the concept behind that betrays the initial impression of the work. That is, the work, which relocates the aesthetic sensibilities of the Dagijoa boss, reads the very topography of the Korean colonial style of aesthetics.

Dagijoa No. 10 draws our attention to the narrator speaking in contradictory voices; it enables viewers to comfortably listen to stories of the historical, economic background of the Indeokwon's middle-class 386 Generation and simultaneously guarantees an intellectual level of the work's concept—this is the artist's narrative persona.

Potentiality is the condition of a subject who is believed to possess the capacity to satisfy to a certain expectation. And the ability to make a work of art is always inherent in an artist. In his book, *Potentialities*, Giorgio Agamben reads this capacity from a linguistic perspective. For Agamben, the artist's potentialities, like language, include the variable of time period, and what is expected of the artist changes according to a given paradigm. Perhaps the person with artistic potentialities anticipated by our present time is not one who boasts his/her genius through work. Nor is s/he someone who cannot even provide the joy of "intellectual pleasure" with too simple work. Perhaps the persona, defined as thus, approaches Kim's propositions.