

## 11. A LIFE COMPANION

### *Art Practice and the Studio Critique*

**After studying painting in Seoul, you went to Yale to do a Master's degree in painting and printmaking and finally read successfully for a doctorate at Teacher's College at Columbia University in New York. What attracted you to the US?**

I have never stopped creating art, except during my twenty-six months spent with the military. Probably, my hands would not have become as experienced as they are now without my intense formal training. I have studied at art-focused schools since my childhood. By the time I reached college level, I realised that university entrance exams in art were not only boring but also too rigid. So, I had finally reached a point from which I had to back up a bit to reboot my creative energy. In a way, my military days helped me find the time and chance to cleanse or reformat my hands and routine thinking from past training.

After the military, I found myself looking for a radical and real change in environment. It is not because I hated the Korean educational system. As a person who had been bound to the same place for a long time, and of course, as an artist with curious eyes, I really wanted to have a new set of experiences. But then, I realised I had less than enough money. What a universal problem I faced! So I looked for a scholarship and a good one came into my radar; the Fulbright Scholarship for study in the US. Luckily enough, I was selected as a recipient of that scholarship in the fall of 2002, and went to America the following summer.

If I had not gotten this scholarship, I might have looked for other opportunities in Europe, for financial reasons. But I did not want to look for opportunities in Asia or other continents. My whole world had been Korea. Korean culture is rooted in Eastern philosophy and customs, but in this globally pervasive Western pop culture, Korea is not an exception. So with mixed feelings, I wanted to experience Western culture thoroughly and I am glad that I studied in the US. The studio critique was much more open and democratic and helped me a lot in developing my art and in growing as a mature person. In addition, I became fluent in English and I found a gallery to represent my work in New York. So, based on a reflection about my past, I am definitely happy with the time I spent in the US.



*Figure 31. Sangbin IM, People-MoMA, 2009, lambda print, 80 × 182.9 cm (top), 34.3 × 182.9 cm (bottom)*

**Before leaving to start your studies in the US, did you have a preconception about what you might find there that was different from the kind of world you inhabited in Korea?**

Before I left Korea, nothing was very clear. I had a very loose preconception of what I might find in the US. To me, exploring the unknown was more important than setting up specific goals to achieve. I was just bored of my routine environment back then. It was not the superiority in the educational system or the quality of life that mattered to me but difference, freshness, and the newness of ‘non-Korea’. I just wanted to make the most of a completely new place. It took many years of graduate and doctorate study, during which I worked hard to clarify my uncertainties. I was young enough to take such a gamble.

**Your doctorate focused on art education yet you have maintained quite a steady flow of exhibitions over the years. What brought you to education? How did artist-friends of yours react to your decision to read for a doctorate in art education?**

In my mind, art practice and art education can be happy, lifelong companions, and more desirably, they should! However, I have noticed many myths disseminated by artists in opposition to the pedagogical notion of art. This problem is discussed in

detail in my dissertation, *The Generative Impact of Online Critiques on Individual Art Practice*, submitted in the spring of 2011 at Teachers College, Columbia University.

In short, some people like to mystify or separate doing art from other activities, as follows. Firstly, they assume that too much reading makes artists negligent of the physical practice of art and also makes them appear like they are lamely trying to cover up their art with rhetoric. Secondly, they believe art practice is a sole priority, which requires exceptional devotion of one's entire energy and time. This line of thought regards teaching as subsidiary. Thirdly, they envision artistic passion and creative agony as an image of a humble and reclusive artist distanced from the world. So, according to them, artists should be eccentric and ignorant of society. On the other hand, others seem to overemphasise the business side of art. They consider success as social fame and financial success in the art market. So, according to them, education is only meaningful when it helps artists to succeed financially.

Either way, art may lose its rich layers of contextual meanings in the world. I argue that an individual who puts art practice or business at the centre of life to the exclusion of other artistic activities should be open to challenge. Art and art education should not lose their pedagogical relationship. Art does not exist alone and it manifests itself in various contexts in the world. The meaning of art is not fixed but varies on the basis of the different ways we make sense of it, but the so-called art world and art market condition art in various ways.

Without education, how in the world can we constantly redefine what art is, how to do it, and why it is meaningful? Some people regard art-making as a kind of competition. Art can be a competition, but it should not have to be that way all the time. Art is life, and it is always educational. Artistic development and personal growth in the world are achieved by creatively doing art and critically reflecting on it. This whole process is educational. With such a broad definition of art education and constant research on the relationships between artist, student and teacher, art can finally be freed from the misconceptions of art purists, art marketers and the misguided general public.

Some artists prefer to make art when they are alone in their studios. For them, teaching, meeting people or even eating may be considered as a waste of time. Other artists are wise enough to make their teaching help them develop their art as well. To me, education is an excellent way to develop art holistically. Of course, I understand my artist-friends' different perspectives and mixed feelings on my doctoral pursuit. Some friends even tease me and say that my degree is all about getting a teaching job. Yet, is getting a job fatal to artists? Art is a totality in life, and I believe that my artistic life has benefitted enormously from art education.

**Can you be more specific about this? How did your studies in art education contribute to your growth as an artist?**

My dissertation at Teachers College stemmed from my interest in the studio critique. I did not grasp the significance of studio critiques until I entered university. Even

though I went to art middle and high school, studio critiques were rare in the art classes. They were almost only employed for evaluation purposes. In Korea, most art schools do not take portfolios as in the West. Instead, they tell students to come to class and make art under the same conditions. Sungshin University, where I am a professor, is generous enough to give students five hours. Most other universities in Korea give three or four hours for the whole process of art-making. This so-called 'art' is not really art at all since students are expected to make art that is based on provided questions, images or objects. Skilful hands are what matter in this type of exam. In Korea, most high school students go to private art institutions to prepare for the entrance exam. Rather than creating art with free spirits, they are forced and trained to follow rigid standards.

This type of exam has its pros and cons. Due to this exam, a number of Korean undergraduate students have a high level of visual representational skills. On the other hand, due to the amount of pressure felt by training for the exam, middle and high school students do not have enough opportunities to create their own art. Moreover, their discussions, if any, are tailored towards succeeding in the entrance exam. However, when they enter the university, they are finally free from their exams, so they start searching for what they would really like to paint. At this point, some of them are stressed out and feel lost in the middle of nowhere due to their previous non-creative education.

Art education needs studio critiques at all ages. As time goes by, young children's thinking becomes more sophisticated and their creative minds start to develop slowly. In my research on higher art education, a number of art schools put emphasis on art practice along with critical dialogue. Studio critique is good at directing attention to a diversity of world views and different ways of understanding works of art. The studio critique is also good at nurturing critical reflective thinking on art in a dialectic way and at helping artists understand and develop their art and personally grow.

In reality, the studio critique varies in quality and many teachers and students assume that it is only meant to evaluate art. I argue that the studio critique is neither a competition to crown winners nor a survival guide. Very little research has been conducted on studio critique. I spent years researching studio critique and realised that it can happen anywhere. It can even work in the mind of a single person if you implement a variety of methods. When I am alone in my studio, my background in education better equips me with a variety of critical perspectives. This helps me understand my art better in order to make responsible and meaningful decisions about my art all the time. I partly thank art education for developing the fullness of my mind.

**In terms of available time in a typical day of yours, do you ever feel that teaching or art practice is becoming too dominant? Do you feel torn between these two disciplines?**

I am the dean of the Painting department at Sungshin University in Seoul, Korea. Sungshin has the second largest art department in Korea. This means that there



*Figure 32. Sangbin IM, Louvre Museum 2, 2012, lambda print, 128.3 × 237.4 cm*

are many teachers, classes and undergraduate, graduate and doctoral students. These days, full-time professors in Korea are required to teach more classes than professors used to in the past. This means that I need to teach many classes and also do administrative work for the department.

Let's suppose that there exists a right ratio between art-making and teaching for the benefit of their maximum synergy. If so, as a dean I may have been spending way too much time at school than I should have. If I can cut down my time spent at school in half, I imagine that it would be the perfect balance. However, you can never know what the right amount of teaching is and you cannot control this once you are in the institution like a university.

We know that a great artist can be a bad teacher, and that a great teacher can be a bad artist. If I am a great artist and also a great teacher, then my life is truly blessed! Obviously, I work hard as an artist and luckily enough, I love teaching. Ironically, my health has also gotten much better since I started teaching. If you are a full-time artist you have no duties tomorrow and you push your body to the maximum limit. That was exactly my case. I did not go to bed until I was satisfied with my work. This meant that my usual bedtime started way after sunrise in the morning. I was solitary and without proper exercise or nutrition all the time. But now, I am a changed man. I go to bed earlier because I regularly go to school, usually 3 days per week. While teaching, my hands, neck, and spine take a full rest. Somehow, talking about art is often easier than physically working on art. In addition, listening to what students have to say about their works is so refreshing most of the time.

My teaching gives me some time-off from the studio. This helps to produce a nice cocktail of things or bibimbap (Korean food in which a variety of ingredients is



mixed). Monism meeting pluralism is healthier than dualism. The tension that exists between practice and teaching or practice and theory could be a force that stimulates a greater harmony. The golden ratio, the best recipe of the two activities, differs from person to person.

**You've discussed the overlaps between art practice and education at some length. Let's discuss your art-work and pedagogies one by one, starting with practice. What have been your key preoccupations as an artist?**

At a very young age, I had already made up my mind to be an artist. From the age of three and throughout my elementary school days, I regularly attended art institutions. Many art teachers urged me to apply for art middle school, so I ended up going to art middle and high school before entering the art department at Seoul National University. After graduation, I envisioned pursuing my study abroad, so I went to art school at Yale University where I received an MFA in the department of Painting and Printmaking. Afterwards, my interest in the sociological notions of the artist, art and the art world led me to pursue a doctoral degree at Teachers College, Columbia University in New York.

In recent years, my main projects have been People Project, Museum Project, and Cityscape Project. These projects express a combination of my fascination and anxiety surrounding the spectacle of the modern megalomaniac city, institutions, or other cultural sites; places that are driven and constructed by capitalistic desires or visions, that stage and condition the way people live, work, and enjoy life. As this fascination suggests, I am a person who likes to live and work in cosmopolitan cities such as New York and Seoul, while being somewhat critical of them. In other words, I appreciate the contemporary spectacle, as provocative and problematic as it is. As an artist, this is what I desire to portray via my artistic vision and my experience of the world today.

As a painter, my approach to photography is different from that of many traditional photographers. My interest is not photo *taking* or capturing, but photo *making* or construction. For instance, my photographs are not taken at one go, but made of numerous fragmented images, like the accumulation of brushstrokes in a painting. My concern is not the manipulation of the original, but a construction based on photographs of real objects to create a visualisation of my world. Moreover, my photographs have a painterly surface due to the fact that I employ layers of actual brushstrokes onto the photographic images. Likewise, I have actively incorporated the language of painting into photography. While some people seem to think of me as a photographer, I see myself as an artist who uses a hybrid of painting and photography.

**How important are these different artistic media during the teaching process? As a teacher, what kinds of pedagogical models do you employ?**

My pedagogy is student-centred and aims for the 'lifelong self-learner', which helps to construct a lifelong relationship between continuous art practice and studio



*Figure 33. Sangbin IM, Central Park 1, 2007, lambda print, 177.8 × 101.6 cm*

critique. In my teaching, I constantly try to develop and implement new ways of critiquing artworks. This helps students seek the ways to overcome creative difficulties and also helps them develop their art and personally grow. Secondly, I search for art research methodologies that are right for individual students to help them explore new venues, generate a variety of insights about their art and to guide them as they practice and research art in everyday life. Thirdly, I actively introduce a variety of media as a set of tools for students to utilise. We know that art is always a reflection of its time. It can never exist or have any meaning away from it. Therefore, in this media-saturated society, students need to know about technology to be able to truly express it in art. Media, whether traditional or new, are a means to an end. We need to know all the tools in the box to build a house. Fourthly, I mentor students to find their artistic voice as well as their vocation.

In addition, my pedagogy aims at legitimising artist research as a valid quest for artistic knowledge. Artistic research fuses the researcher and the researched as an artistic life fuses art-making and teaching art, practice and theory. As previously explained, for this highly individualised fusion to take place, we need to make full use of the studio critique. However, in real life, studio critiques also have limitations. In order to overcome these limitations, I have explored ways of diversifying the settings to generate various perspectives on artworks and to help artists both subjectify and objectify their art. I have also actively proposed models of the studio critique that have evolved from my personal experiences and teaching practice. Those models include individual critique, small and large group critique, relay critique, role-playing critique, random association critique, flip chart critique,

artist statement critique, presentation critique, virtual show critique and so on. Based on my practice of these models, I have also categorised types of critiques: study-referred, presentation-centred, preference-generated, composition-oriented, socio-cultural, artwork-directed and advice-based critique.

**You speak of methods of art education that combine different categories of studio critique and art practice, and you have also referred to your own hybrid artistic work. If the education of artists is based on assumptions about what it means (or should mean) to be an artist, do you think that art education in academies or universities today reflects this hybrid quality? Do you think we should start to rethink the way we train artists today?**

My dissertation in art education made me reflect about myself as an artist-researcher as opposed to an artist-technician. In my research on studio critiques, I found several benefits. Firstly, it helped me distinguish between subjective and objective engagement with my art and how to find the right balance between the two. Secondly, it helped me develop a keen mind about art. Thirdly, it made me pay attention not only to my art but also to its presentation. Fourthly, it directed my attention not only to my art but also to the art market. Last of all, it led me to experiment with and promote various formats of the studio critique as art pedagogies. Accordingly, I argue that the studio critique promotes different ways of thinking about art. It creates meaning for individuals, helps elaborate the presentation of art and enriches pedagogical dialogues in art education.

Artists should be mentors and mentees at the same time not only for other artists but also for themselves. Artists are not mere technicians. They are holistic beings who synergise practice and theory. To train an artist is to fuse art, artist, and life together. An artistic life as a way of living does not only take place in the studio. It also takes place in the street or at a café where people converse with each other or when I am alone immersed in my chain of thoughts or acts. As in hobbies, art education is a necessary part of artistic life that enriches art-making as well. I graduated from an art school but an artistic life continues throughout one's life.

We know that context, whether historical, personal or socio-cultural, makes art rich and meaningful, especially when it comes to contemporary art. It is time for us to understand the term 'artist' in a holistic way. If artists are artists only during art-making, they are merely engineers of a mechanical process. Art education is one of the most important factors that make art genuinely artistic and holistic. For instance, without a glass to hold water, it is hard to drink water. Even though we can, we do not have to drink water without a glass all the time. Studio critique may be a small part of education, but it plays an important role in transforming the glass into a variety of shapes and sizes.

To me, studio critique is an important part of art education. An artist should be much more than a person who is incapable of doing things other than making an art object. Art education should focus on training a person to become a holistic artist



who lives a full life. If not, only a few artists can survive and others will disappear or remain unhappy. We need a variety of standards to evaluate success. We need to think of artists as complex and hybrid individuals. Being an artist is a means to an end after all. It is not about the insistence on purity or about the desire to succeed in the market. It is to rethink and review the world in ever more enriching ways.