

Gaze of the others

Gaze of the Other: Unilateral Agreement – Loss of Individuality through Social Promises

Various kinds of regulations constitute a society. They are largely legal and official regulations, ethical standards, and customs and traditions based on culture. From family to country and international relations, there are regulations and conventions that must be kept. As such, regulations that promise a more stable environment of life are referred to as social norms. And social constituents try to keep and obey such norms, through which human beings feel a sense of unity and harmony. On the other hand, however, people often confine each other in the frame of such unity, criticizing anyone who stands outside of social norms. Although legal and ethical standards must be kept, customs and conventions don't necessarily need to be kept. Even then, we try to stay in social standards, because stepping out of such standards can lead to alienation. My work questions these social standards, as to when they were formed, through whom they were formed, and why the majority of people try to abide by them.

There aren't always sure answers to everything in this society. The law and ethical standards should be kept like common sense. For example, acts of assault and violence are wrong both legally and ethically. On the other hand, unjust social conventions or parts of Confucianism don't necessarily need to be abided by. For example, the traditional family system in Korea is based on passing down direct family line through the oldest son. Therefore, boys served an important function in the family, and it was preferable to give birth to a son than to a daughter. The traditional family system favoring patriarchy can often be seen in the traditional Korean culture deeply immersed in Confucianism. Such long faulty tradition has continued on, yielding more people to have boys even to the point of causing an imbalance in the number of boys and girls in the society. Even though the Korean society calls these conventions 'evil habit', the society also denounces the rejection of these old customs.

Obviously, not all customs are wrong. Newcomers to a neighborhood passing around rice cakes to his or her new neighbors can bring people closer together in warmth, and the custom of elders always starting the meal first before children can teach manners to the young. However, I believe that just as times and world change and civilization develops, social customs must change accordingly. While law and social systems change to suit the time, customs and conventions remain stagnant. Many people from the older generation still think that their standards are the norm, and try to measure the younger generation with their own judgment of right and wrong.

This work uses traffic lights—which is an absolute rule that all generations, peoples and nations must abide by—to illustrate the standards in our life today that remain unchanged and fixed despite the changes of time. In place of lights in the traffic light box that give out signals, I inserted expressionless faces of people. The faces are hung up high at the top part of the traffic lights, looking down on the world. The audience below looks up at the faces in the traffic lights box, which seem to signify the surveillance-like qualities of social standards. While in most cases one traffic light box is attached to one pole, there are many signals on one pole in my work. This signifies the fact that in the one society in which I live, there are many kinds of social customs, regulations, traditions and order. There are as many faces as the regulations that must be kept.