



Kim Wonyoung

The Hand of a Primate Escaping a Building Where the Elevator Has Stopped

The elevator connecting the city's ground level with the subway station is a crossroads of two worlds that otherwise could never meet. Inside the confined elevator space, elderly people, individuals with disabilities, children in strollers, and foreign tourists with suitcases come together. They look at each other with curiosity, compete, and converse. However, the elevator can always stop in an "emergency." This potential for an emergency (exceptional state) proves that these two worlds are inevitably "para-." Yet, it may only be when we acknowledge this potential as part of reality that the cracks between these "para-" worlds begin to form.

The elevator

When I use the subway, I often share the elevator with elderly citizens. Sadang Station, where Seoul Subway Lines 2 and 4 intersect, is always bustling with passengers, and the only transfer elevator is small, resulting in long lines even on weekdays. It's not hard at all to see citizens in their 60s to 80s waiting for the elevator.

Seoul subway elevators are set to close the doors automatically after 20 seconds, and the "close" button doesn't work. They say it's for safety when disabled passengers board, but I don't quite understand. It's reasonable to set the doors to close after a longer time for people who move slowly and need more time, but why doesn't the "close" button work? Even if I get on in about 2 seconds, I still have to wait 18 seconds for the doors to close. Then, with 11 seconds left, a 75-year-old man 10 meters away shouts, "Wait for me." Ah, if I press the "open" button now, another 20 seconds will be added, meaning it would have taken 29 seconds from the time I boarded until the doors finally close. But I can't just ignore the 75-year-old citizen, can I? While I hope he can cover the 10 meters in 11 seconds, I resign myself



to pressing the “open” button. He gets in and tries pressing the “close” button, but it doesn’t work. He looks embarrassed and says, “Why won’t this close?”

With about 10 seconds left before the doors automatically close again, a 72-year-old woman carrying a bundle walks over. Now, the two of us need to come to an agreement. Since I waited for him, the older man might feel guilty for not wanting to wait for the next person. The decision is mine to make. I close my eyes for a moment and press the “open” button again. The 72-year-old woman boards the elevator and says, “Oh my, it’s so hot today. My knees have been hurting lately.” She feels a bit embarrassed, realizing that, though relatively younger, she has delayed the ride for a person who seems older than herself and another who is disabled, so she blames the weather and her knees. A minute after I boarded, the elevator doors finally close.

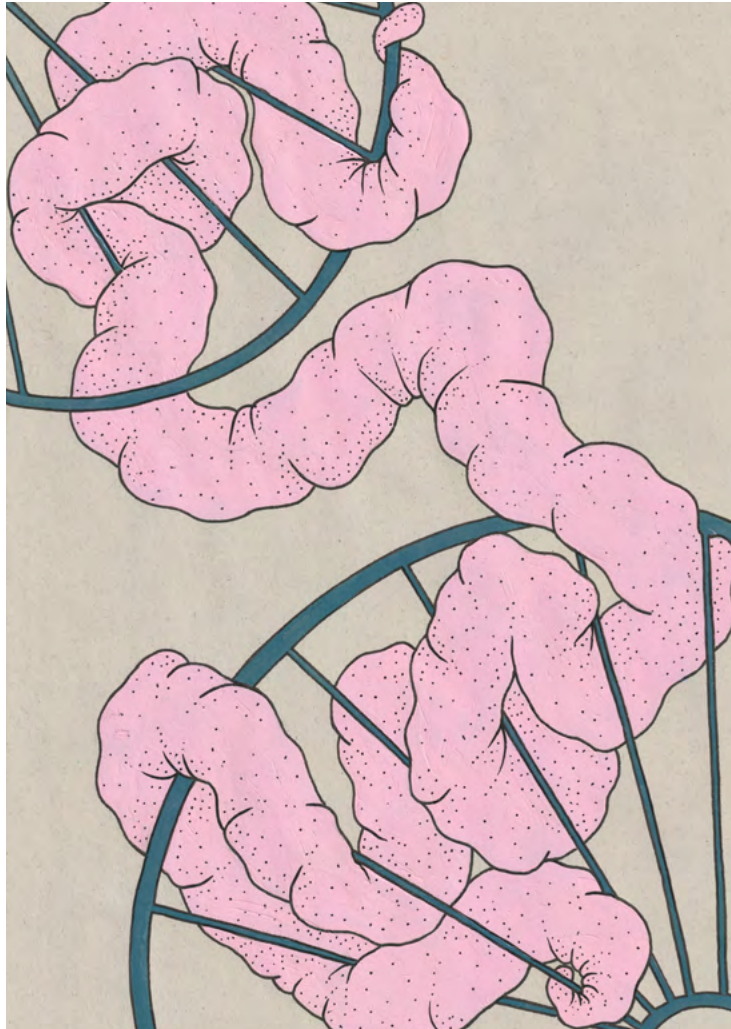
The story of how subway elevators came to be is a long and complicated one. To put it simply, elevators in the Seoul Subway were rare even in the early 2000s. Disabled individuals protested fiercely for them, and at those times, some elderly citizens would shout, “Why are you making such a fuss here? Go to the North!” (For reference, Pyongyang’s subway system is reportedly more like an underground bunker built hundreds of meters deep to prepare for wartime. But does Pyongyang’s subway even have facilities for disabled access?) Anyway, time has passed, and now the elderly, the sick, travelers with large suitcases, and wheelchair users all share the same elevators. We, who may not encounter each other usually, cross paths in these small machines.

In reality, alongside peaceful coexistence, there is also discomfort and conflict. Citizens in their 70s likely saw very few wheelchair users when they were young or middle-aged and probably never shared a subway ride with them. As a result, they tend to be somewhat insensitive to the civic ethics of the 2020s. I (quite often) hear questions like, “How much does that thing [the wheelchair] cost?” and I sometimes wonder, *Are they asking me to sell it right here in this 3.3-square-meter elevator?* Of course, that’s not the case. “Each wheel costs 5 million won [about 4,000 dollars],” I respond. “What? Come on, that can’t be true.” Of course it isn’t. But for at least a brief moment, I want to create a false (and incorrect) sense of equality in this tiny elevator, pretending that even though my body isn’t fully functional, I am part of the upper class in a capitalist society. Sometimes the situation gets awkward. “Really? Huh... well, my wife had a stroke recently and can’t walk anymore. I thought it would be nice if she could use something like that. Seeing you, it seems great. You can go wherever you want. But if it’s that expensive, well... I guess it’s because it’s automatic.”

I recompose my face. Then, I explain that the most basic model of an electric wheelchair is suitable for leisurely strolls around



the neighborhood and costs around 2 million won, with about 80 percent of the cost potentially covered by health insurance. “These days, even if walking is difficult, you can move around most of Seoul at a slow speed with one of these. There’s no need to worry,” I say. When the elevator doors open on the platform, I feel uneasy about riding in the same subway car as him, so I quickly move away at a fast pace.



The truth of “para-”

The elevator, by significantly enhancing human vertical mobility, has become an essential feature of urban civilization, which concentrates large numbers of people to generate productivity. It has especially opened up vast three-dimensional spaces to those who cannot walk on two feet. Previously, people who couldn’t walk were confined to crawling on the ground or, if they were fortunate, using a wheelchair, but they were denied access to spaces that unfolded along the vertical axis. In this sense, the elevator serves as a pathway to a para-space—spaces alongside but previously inaccessible to those who cannot walk.

The prefix “para,” which conveys the meaning of parallel or alongside, is frequently used in our era as a symbol representing disabled bodies. For example, a business that offers professional



management services in the entertainment industry for individuals with disabilities is named ParaStar Entertainment. The term “Paralympic,” which refers to the Olympic Games for disabled athletes, also incorporates this prefix. Beyond the meaning of “parallel” or “equal alongside,” para also implies something beyond or outside of. To exist parallel to something without intersecting means to exist outside of it. The Paralympics aims to be an event of equal standing to the Olympics, yet the two do not intersect. The story of Oscar Pistorius, the South African disabled track athlete, is well-known. He wore advanced prosthetic legs, won a gold medal at the Paralympics, and later challenged himself to compete in the Olympics. His bid sparked a debate within the world of athletics. Following a legal challenge to a ruling that barred him from participating he was allowed to compete, and he ran at the London 2012 Olympics. Pistorius, in a way, became one of the only people to cross between these two “parallel” worlds (though, after briefly being a hero, he was convicted of murdering his girlfriend and is now serving a prison sentence in South Africa).

Let’s think of the existing para-spaces connected by elevators. Schools, various public institutions, theaters, museums, and underground clubs in Hongdae all have elevators. If an elevator is present, the space and its exterior (or the space on the first floor) are no longer in a para-relationship. We hope that by intersecting these previously parallel spaces through the device of the elevator, “equal” encounters between humans, which were not possible before, can now take place. However, as the symbol “para-” suggests (if they are equal, they do not intersect; if they intersect, they are not equal), while we may meet in the same space, we still do not seem truly equal. It even makes me wonder whether it was our spatial separation, our existence in “parallel,” that allowed us to consider each other as equals.

Let’s assume that an elevator was installed in a club in Hongdae, Seoul, and both you, who can move vertically with ease, and I, who cannot, entered the club together to dance. Those who witnessed the scene might post on Instagram, claiming they’ve found evidence of a “radical political practice” emerging in Korean club culture. Meanwhile, a slightly less culturally savvy club manager would tweet about how it’s always been his dream to create a “kind club.” The elevator has finally become a passage that connects previously “para-” spaces, and we’ve “intersected” in this shared space. But in that moment, are we truly equal?

In the summer of 2023, a teacher in Seoul took their own life due to the abuse of power by a student’s parents, which sparked a public outcry over how teachers are treated by parents. At the same time, it became known that a famous webtoon artist had filed a lawsuit against a teacher who had abused their disabled child, triggering a debate about inclusive education for children with disabilities. Now, we face the resurgence of a public opinion suggesting that children with developmental disabilities (who



are often considered to have difficulty with cognitive “vertical mobility”) should be sent back to segregated schools (para-spaces without elevators). This sentiment is expressed with startling clarity and directness in online forums: “Disabled children should be educated separately. Why are they being put together with normal kids and causing harm?” Does the meaning of “para-”—that which is equal does not intersect, and that which intersects is not equal—reveal a truth about life?

Elevators sometimes stop. They break down, undergo safety inspections, or fail during power outages. In the event of an earthquake or fire inside a subway station or building, all elevators except for the emergency ones behind firewalls would come to a halt. For this reason, safety videos advise against using elevators during disasters, instructing people to calmly use the stairs while covering their mouth and nose with a piece of cloth. I often imagine crawling up (or down) those stairs. It would usually be possible, but if many people were rushing down at the same time, wouldn’t they trample over me as they flee? I once heard a story from Japan about a person with a severe disability who couldn’t escape from a building during an earthquake. A neighbor, who lived nearby, came to their house and helped them evacuate. In our time, we believe that it is ideal not knowing who your neighbor is.

At a hotel in London, I received a form for creating a Personal Emergency Evacuation Plan (PEEP), which included questions like, “How many people would be needed to assist you?” Later, while working on research related to disaster evacuation, I found out that the creation of such individualized plans is an obligation for both public facility operators and users. I don’t know if, in the event of a real fire, two people will actually come to rescue me just because I wrote down “two people” on that form. However, filling out such documents does offer some peace of mind. Courage is often like boiling water—sometimes the heart reaches 99 degrees but falls just one degree short of taking action. Conversely, if a tiny bit of trust or a viable alternative is added at that 99-degree point, it can lead to action. If a fire broke out while I was sleeping in a 15th-floor hotel room, I might simply give up, log onto the internet, and write a farewell message on social media. But if I had an emergency evacuation plan in place, even if I couldn’t fully trust that someone would come to help, I could muster the courage to crawl down the stairs with at least the wheels of my wheelchair strapped to my back. Because then I might meet the two people running up to help me, perhaps around the 11th floor.

Reality principle

In 2023, I performed a solo piece called *Reality Principle* at the Korean International Accessible Dance Festival (KIADA), where I practiced tightrope walking. I stretched a thin rubber string



across the stage, from front to back, and played on it with my feet. Of course, I didn't actually stand on the rope. I lay down or supported myself with my arms on the ground with only my feet touching the string. My feet, which can barely bear any weight, could spread out or curl up, and knew how to play with the string.

While my feet—useless for normal vertical movement—played with the rope, the artist Kim Shantal captured the process in photographs. The feet exposed in the photos appeared unfamiliar, with bent calves, unruly hair, widely spread toes, and knobby joints. In some photos, they even looked like the hands of primates.

Tightrope walking assumes the risk of falling. So, walking the rope while lying down or supporting myself with my arms is not possible in the conventional sense. However, throughout rehearsals and the actual performance, I experienced it as “tightrope walking.” As I exposed my feet in front of my fellow dancers and audience, posed for close-up photos, and documented the experience, I became aware that any failure could make my movements and their records reduce me to a freaky, an “animalistic,” or “unequal” body.

The fact that elevators stop working in emergencies signals that the spaces we currently navigate will not remain intersected forever. When a disaster strikes and the elevator halts, spaces become disconnected. If a fire broke out while you and I were in a club, everyone else would escape by walking, and we'd be left perplexed and unsure of what to do. In a dark, smoke-filled space, we might be the only ones left. I might ask you to leave me behind and get help, or I might grab you by your pants, begging you not to leave me alone. Either way, in the moment the elevator becomes unusable, we find ourselves in a completely different para-time-space from others.

The thought that the exposure of my disabled body in performance and its documentation could always render me a “freak” would point to the loose “intersection” between the rehearsal studio at the Seoul Dance Center and the stage at the packed Arko Arts Theater. I undoubtedly created the work in equal partnership with my colleagues and performed for an audience willing to see a disabled body dance. Kim Shantal's camera had no intention of capturing any trace of a “freak show” in my leg-foot. However, I couldn't help but think about the possibility of failure—of stopping, of falling—because of the “reality principle.” What would happen if, after believing we were dancing equally in a school, theater, or club connected by a perfectly functioning elevator, the elevator suddenly stopped? What if I fully believed that I would never fall (into being labeled a freak), freely showed off my short, thin, bent feet, and played with the rope only to make the fall? Freud's reality principle reminds us not to forget the logic of “para-” —that, in truth, if we were truly equal, we could never fully intersect—underlying the “equality” of the



illusion that offers comfort and pleasure. If we find ourselves meeting in a space, crossing our different identities and conditions, that “intersection” is temporary or a sign that we are not truly equal. Therefore, by properly suspending the pleasures offered by illusion, we would be able to access reality.

However, acknowledging the possibility of failure—of falling off the rope or the elevator stopping in a disaster—doesn’t mean becoming cynical about life. I wonder if, by acknowledging this possibility of failure, we might finally open up the potential for genuine encounters. The Personal Emergency Evacuation Plan (PEEP) that the hotel in London provided makes it clear that we might not actually be sharing the same space. In a disaster, we are placed under different conditions. Yet, it opens up a conversation about what we can do for each other when such a situation arises. In reality, PEEP might have limited usefulness in a real disaster. How would someone in a large motorized wheelchair be evacuated down the stairs of an eight-story building? (A specialized disaster evacuation lift would be required.) Still, the existence of PEEP reconfigures the “reality” of the space we’re in right now by promising that we won’t entirely run “parallel,” even in an emergency. Similarly, while I might fail at tightrope walking and fall into being labeled a “freak,” acknowledging that possibility allows us to share this space right now—and gives room to reconstruct the current reality.

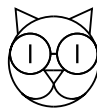
I imagine the possibilities of what we could do when cultural apparatuses (illusion and pleasure) fail—when the elevator breaks down, when a performance fails, or when I fall off the rope. What would I, a 72-year-old, and a 75-year-old do in front of a broken down elevator? What could you and I, or someone else, do caught in an emergency while dancing in a club? In front of a completely failed performance, when people watch me as if I were a monkey in a zoo, what could we do?

Reality Principle photographed by Shantal Jeewon Kim:
<https://bigfootnotes.wordpress.com>



BIO

Kim Wonyoung is a South Korean writer, performing artist, and lawyer. He has worked for the National Human Rights Commission of Korea and has published non-fiction books on the relationship between disability, technology, and art. As a performer, he primarily creates and participates in dance performances.



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