



A Needle Woman, 2005, Sana's (Yemen), one of six channel video projection, 10:40 loop, silent

Gnomon of Place, Gnomon of Foreignness

Steven Henry Madoff, 2013

"Hospitality is certainly, necessarily, a right, a duty, an obligation, the *greeting* of the foreign other as a friend but on the condition that the host, the *Wirt*, the one who receives, lodges or gives *asylum* remains the patron, the master of the household, on the condition that he maintains his own authority *in his own home*, that he looks after himself and sees to and considers all that concerns him and thereby affirms the law of hospitality as the law of the household, *oikonomia*, the law of his household, the law of a place...." —Jacques Derrida, "Hostipitality" [1]

The six videos projected simultaneously that comprise the Korean artist Kimsooja's *A Needle Woman* (2005) present the artist wearing precisely the same clothes, standing precisely the same way, and, it would seem, at the same time of day, the sun shining down. She is absolutely still amid passing crowds of inhabitants in Patan, Nepal; Havana, Cuba; N'Djamena, Chad; Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; Sana'a, Yemen; and Jerusalem, Israel. The crowds react differently to this odd figure, clearly a foreigner. They are presented in slow motion, with no sound, which only emphasizes the sense of movement, instant reaction, passage.

A Needle Woman has been written about many times, and Kimsooja is often described in these writings as a nomadic figure in this work, traveling across the world to come to rest in a crowded thoroughfare and then move on to the next. The needle referred to in the title is Kimsooja theorizing herself as a needle that passes through the fabric of a place and its people; and there is that other sense of a needle, that it sews together, is an instrument of suture, of healing, which could not be more appropriate because the locations that are visited

in the work are all places of violence, disrepair or unresolved conflict. But as the light falls on her vertical figure, I would suggest another instrument that she can be interpreted to represent, and that is the gnomon. A gnomon is the standing element of a sundial that casts the shadow and indicates the hour. It is an index of the sun's passage over the surface of the earth, but not an index of the sun for itself, so to speak, but the sun as a sign of time, and time not for itself but as the sign of what happens ultimately to each of us. Time is the marker of our transition through aging, the marker of our passage, we at the center; and the gnomon, therefore, indicates not only surfaces but human interiority, not only an exterior of sunlight and shadow but time in us, of us, and for us. (The old Greek word *gnomon* means "indicator," "the one who discerns," or "that which reveals.") This is to say that light and shadow begin on the surface of things, and we inscribe them in a symbolic regime; they become elements in the narrative of our rise in time and our fading, of our moral troubles, our ethical thresholds and flaws. These lights and shadows work their ways into us, embed themselves, and are indicated by the marks our actions leave.

Kimsooja, who plants herself in the middle of *place*, which is the activation of space as a locus of meaning, is this gnomon figure, this gnomon of place, against whom the physical light and its symbolic presence falls—an indexical instrument recording human passage and transition. This is on the level of the anthropocentric, of the human as the root of all occasion, all meaningfulness. [2] But the index here does not simply regard the internalization of knowledge, an epistemological dominion of its own self-reflexive primacy. No, Kimsooja, whose face is always unseen in this work, who stands like statuary, a flesh monument to the human, offers us the face of everyone else. These faces are the signifying engines of each tableau. They reflect light passing, of movement that is notated in time, of shadows, of a narrative unspooling, telling the story of a transitory exchange, of the value of the transitory in its opposite: that which leaves a mark. Where is this exchange? It is transacted within that "law of a place" Derrida suggests, which is a place of exchange, with its *oikonomia*, its discipline of the household's inventory. It is an economy of relations that, like hospitality, assumes an exchange, and it happens here, in *A Needle Woman*, among a triad of nodes:

1. There are the individual faces in the crowd.
2. There is Kimsooja, the one who discerns.
3. There are the viewers, us, the ones toward whom these faces move.

The author Susan Stewart has written that a face is a "'deep' text, a text whose meaning is complicated by change and by a constant series of alterations between a reader and an author," [3] and this is what we find here. These texts are read by Kimsooja, as they read hers. They write each other and read each other, and these trajectories of reciprocity extend to us, the third node of the triad. Kimsooja is the indicator of meaning, that which reveals, which she reads on the faces of these foreigners, who are not foreigners in this place where she is the foreigner, but to her and to us are themselves foreigners in foreign lands, who she instigates to *project* meaning, and we receive it. Our position, of course, is the same as the artist's. Our expressions, our knowledges, our dispositions are not seen, since we too face forward, away from others. If she is the index of these texts, then we who receive the meanings of these faces are the archive. In us lie the accumulation of their expressions and perceived meanings. They leave notations, marks.

In each of these places where Kimsooja has come, she writes herself into another book, another register: the book of guests. As such she has the right to be treated decently, without aggression, by the people of any foreign land, as Immanuel Kant says. He says it plainly in his tract from 1795, "Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch," of which the third section is entitled, "The Law of World Citizenship Shall Be Limited to Conditions of Universal Hospitality." He writes that hospitality is "not a question of philanthropy but of right. Hospitality means the right of a stranger not to be treated as an enemy when he arrives on the soil of another." Her position is one of cosmopolitan demand. International law supports this principle of cosmopolitanism: *If I intend to do you no harm, I will not be the subject of hostility when I cross into your territory.* That is the right of cosmopolitanism, of hospitality.

But of course note that *hostility* has the word "host" within it, so it is buried within the genealogy of human praxis that to be host may also mean to be an aggressor. So it is that this turning of tables, this inversion of

meaning, is embedded within the figure of Kimsooja herself. She would seem to be the guest here in Jerusalem, Patan, Havana, and so forth, an open receptor of her hosts' reactions to her presence. But there is always this possibility of inversion in these terms of host and guest. In her presencing, she is the aggressor, the one who makes a demand, the one who claims by her indexical stance an ownership of place, this space of meaning-making, *adirective* presence, an emanation of control projected onto *her* guests, who instantaneously and therefore unwittingly enter into her symbolic territory and offer up to her, as guests do, something of themselves that she requires for their entrance. As the gnomon, she records these passages, her monitoring of time's essence as the passage of the body, its consciousness, and its disposition of knowledge and meaning. This is what we see. This is what then enters into us and is stored in our memories.

There is another machine at work in *A Needle Woman* because what I have been describing are machines, mechanisms that produce end-products through their labors—in this case, writing machines and reading machines, machines that record each place's citizens caught in the encounter of revealing their reaction to foreignness and leaving their text for the artist, for us. The task the artist has given herself is to be the apparatus of this textuality, to perform it in each of these spaces where, as Henri Lefebvre states, space "is the shifting intersection between that which touches, penetrates, threatens or benefits my body on the one hand, and all other bodies on the other." [4] It is in this spatial situation that Kimsooja's body performs the act of a particular inscription: this revealing of difference. For as I've said, each of these places she has chosen to stand in is a conflict zone, and violence can be defined as a foreignness alien to a first state of being in its tolerance of difference that is Edenic peace. These are then places alien to themselves, and Kimsooja is an alien in these lands of alienation, an index of Otherness in which everyone is an Other as long as there is no resolution of difference or in which difference has not been an accepted resolution in itself. The artist has loaded her meaning-machine with the data of geopolitics and history. And with that data stored, she adds the element of the foreign irritant (herself), the virus, the possibility of another data set with which this first data set must interact.

If Kimsooja's first machine is the performance-body in the operative process of revealing the text of foreignness, this other machine is a byproduct of her body's performance: a different kind of machine, a self-referential machine, an aesthetic machine—the machine of Modernism, built in the nineteenth century, dominant in the twentieth, and still working today. Its operating principle is the self-conscious unveiling of an artwork's mechanism, as Mallarmé unveiled the workings of the poem through a poetry about the self-consciousness of making a poem; as the Cubists made representational illusion on a painted surface a problem of painting to be observed, broken down, and rebuilt, etc. This machine is made manifest in the form that it takes before us here: *A Needle Woman* as video, as a time-based transition of images that hosts time while denying time the ultimacy of its ongoing forward movement. Her video's slow motion distends time and then keeps stopping, refusing it continuity because the video implies that time goes on, then cuts it off over and over in a loop of suspension. The continuity of time in *A Needle Woman* lasts for precisely ten minutes and thirty seconds. Then it begins again. Nor is it one time that starts and stops; its six places present six times starting and stopping simultaneously.

It does not contradict my argument to say, "Well, that's true of any film, video, TV show, streaming webcast, radio program, even a theater play." That may be so, but nonetheless it is here the matter of specific artistic choice that is crucial. In the first performance video of *A Needle Woman*, executed in 1999, Kimsooja did not use slow motion; it was presented in "real" time. But here she purposefully does so, availing herself of the medium's technical self-consciousness of time, revealing the medium's unwillingness to surrender to the time-ness of time, to its continuity, and instead overwhelms it, denies it, commands it, erupts it. (Modernism counts among its hallmarks discontinuity and eruption.) In this sense, her video is a parasite of time, a foreign guest who overtakes its host, just as Derrida says that the host can become the hostage. [5]

This self-referential aesthetic machine is a ghostly presence, for ghost and guest are also words that share the same root in their signifying of the one who visits. This machine of representation hovers, being hosted by time and yet taking time hostage, revealing this internal conflict that remains unresolved—an echo, a shadow laid down over the video's first presence as the record of bodies as meaning-machines whose subject, too, is the encounter of conflict that remains unresolved, the question of the foreigner. Subject and mechanism share the

double-position of the aporia, of an internal confrontation of contradictory forces who are both hosts and guests, just as Kimsooja's figure in *A Needle Woman* stands in this double-position, this double-imposition of silent entreaty and power's requisition of others for one's own purpose. Her figure, then, belongs to the discourse of hospitality. She is the steward of the aporia, the body of suppliant and sovereign, of visitor and imposing owner of place, a needle piercing time, not healing it, but holding it in suspension. Yet we, who are the third node in this transaction, are not outside of time, not held in place. The gnomon of foreignness falls across us and enters us. Time continues in us as foreignness does, with its demands on hosts and guests, its questions of domination, its juridications, its texts, its burdens and pleasures that enter us again, now held by us: an inquiry, an offering, a mirror, a virus of troubled rights.

1. Jacques Derrida, "Hospitality," trans. Barry Stocker and Forbes Morlock, *Angelaki*, volume 5, number 3, December 2000, 4.
2. I will not address here the agency and autonomy of nonhuman things because that is not Kimsooja's subject in this work.
3. Susan Stewart, *On Longing* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 127.
4. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1991), 184.
5. As Derrida says: "So it is indeed the master, the one who invites, the inviting host, who becomes the hostage—and who really always has been. And the guest, the invited hostage, becomes the one who invites the one who invites, the master of the host." *Of Hostipitality*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 123-25.