



A Laundry Woman - Yamuna river, India, 2000, 10:30 video loop, Silent.

## The Discipline of Looking

David Morgan, 2005

Kimsooja's video, *A Laundry Woman* (2000), places the viewer before a silent screen across which a river passes, its surface carrying refuse and fragments of branches, plants, and flowers swept from unseen banks. At the top of the screen, the river vanishes in a white glare, perhaps from the morning sun that hangs just above the river and greets an anonymous Indian woman who has come to the edge of the Yamuna River at Delhi to wash laundry. We see her only from the back, and she never moves. She is the only thing that does not move. After a few moments, the viewer wonders if she is really there. Perhaps she has been burned into the video tape by some mechanical process, or inserted by digital editing. In the age of Photoshop, is anything actually real? Not a hair flutters on her head, her clothing registers no wind or motion.

Yet she is human, and the eye returns to her stalwart, central figure again and again. She stands with her immovable back to the viewer, an Asian version of the so-called *Rückenfigur*, the familiar device of placing a figure seen from the rear in the foreground of a picture, a favorite contrivance of Romantic painters in Europe in the early nineteenth century. It lures viewers into the painting, directing their vision and pulling them to the picture plane, which tends to vanish as they compare themselves to the figure, perhaps even regarding the figure as another version of themselves, or as their fictive counterpart within the work of art. *A Laundry Woman* recalls this iconographical motif by freezing the figure in the video. The artist used the same motif in another silent video, *A Needle Woman* (1999-2001), which she has performed by standing motionless in the crowded streets of Tokyo, Shanghai, Delhi, Cairo, Lagos, and London, among others. In doing so, Kimsooja blurs the distinction between painting and video as media, a move bolstered by the absence of sound.

Why engage in this sort of ambivalence in her medium? Is it one more tired involution of art referring to art? A much better purpose may be at work. The artist pushes her medium to the limits of its ontology, one might

say. She extends video to the point where it threatens to turn into something it's not — in this case, painting. She cloaks the imagery in silence in order to deprive the viewer of the effect of sound, which would clearly distinguish video from non-moving visual media. Even though the water never ceases to flow, and the cloudy surface is continually disrupted by flotsam that ambles by, moving from left to right, I found myself repeatedly rediscovering that it was a river. The white glare across the top of the screen strongly tends to flatten the image, which is affirmed by the lack of shadows and depth in the water. The motionless figure might be staring into a snowstorm, or a scrim, but for the lolling gait of lily pads and fragments of vegetation, plastic bags, and the shadows of birds. Even now as I remember the scene, I find myself dubbing in sound — the distant call of the birds, the drop of water, the skitter of water bugs, the hushed lapping of water at the shoreline out of sight. By depriving us of so much, Kimsooja asks us to look hard and to question the very act of looking. By pressing a visual medium to its threshold, an artist tests the nature of seeing, probes especially the elusive seams where a medium stitches itself to the airy fabric of consciousness.

A medium is never stable, despite what we may wish to think about it. The imagination animates drawings, photographs, and films, supplying what is not there, ignoring what is, and sometime even subverting what one expects or wants to find present. The very same holds true of the mind itself, which is the fundamental medium of consciousness. It is not a stony blank slate on which is etched the secure features and principles of reality. The mind is the very surface of water that the artist envisions in her video. And the mind is anything but stable. The Dhammapada, one of the oldest and most widely revered Buddhist sutras, describes the mind as "wavering and restless, difficult to guard and restrain". "Fickle and flighty, [the mind] flies after fancies wherever it likes." [1] Yet the wisdom of many religions is that our greatest problem can become our most powerful means of salvation. The mind and the body are trainable. Hinduism regards the individual ego or self as something like the larger self, the atman, the being or essence of all things that expresses the ultimate, but ineffable reality called Brahman. Christianity can speak of the individual self as hiding within Christ, who becomes the truer aspect of the self (Colossians 3: 3). The redeemed are those whom another New Testament text describes as "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1: 4).

To be sure, the world's religions should not be melted down to a stew with one taste. Yet, because they all grapple with the same material — the human struggle with selfishness, suffering, and mortality — it is not surprising that a number of parallels may be discerned in very different religious traditions. In each of those cited, the human self, embedded in the mortal body, is the place where longing for deliverance begins as well as the locale in which it is realized — I by albeit starkly different means. For many Christians, body and mind become deeply engaged in transforming suffering into an imitation of God's presence in Christ. For Hindus, body and mind are engaged in mitigating the cause of suffering by training the body in yoga, in dietary practices, and in prayer and ritual offerings. According to The Dhammapada, the person "whose mind in calm self-control is free from the lust of desires, who has risen above good and evil, ... is awake and has no fear". And so begins the rigorous discipline of Buddhist training, to steal the mind against the frailty of the body in order to dismantle the manifold attachments to the fear, lust, anger, and ignorance that propel the illusion of the self-centered self.

Even this lightly comparative consideration of three religions may help us consider Kimsooja's video and, by extension, a great deal of art work today, which explores aspects of religion or addresses parallels between art and religion. As with the comparison of different religions to one another, the task is not to reduce art to religion or vice versa, but to ask in what manner the two appear to operate similarly, and what that means for artistic practice today. Is art a replacement for religion? The claim is not a new one. In the early nineteenth century, the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer described two forms of transcendence that might release human beings from suffering: aesthetic contemplation and the life of asceticism. Both were ways of renouncing what Schopenhauer called the will, the blind force that drives all things in the universe. In delineating the two means, Schopenhauer set the stage for subsequent reflection about the relation of art and religion as two roughly parallel, though not equivalent practices.

Aesthetic contemplation, he claimed, is the means of saying no to the will, of becoming a "pure, will-less subject of knowledge", an eye surveying a work of art or an object of nature from beyond the grip of the will

and seeing only the essence of the thing, the timeless being manifest in the phenomenon. Beauty is the experience of this transcendental reality. Schopenhauer described the operation of aesthetic experience as follows, which merits quotation at length:

Raised up by the power of the mind, we relinquish the ordinary way of considering things... we do not let abstract thought, the concepts of reason, take possession of our consciousness, but, instead of all this, devote the whole power of our mind to perception, sink ourselves completely therein, and let our whole consciousness be filled by the calm contemplation of the natural object actually present, whether it be a landscape, a tree, a rock, a crag, a building, or anything else [such as a river]. We lose ourselves entirely in this object, to use a pregnant expression; in other words, we forget our individuality, our will, and continue to exist only as pure subject, as clear mirror of the object, so that it is as though the object alone existed without anyone to perceive it, and thus we are no longer able to separate the perceiver from the perception, but the two have become one, since the entire consciousness is filled and occupied by a single image of perception. If, therefore, the object has to such an extent passed out of all relation to something outside it, and the subject has passed out of all relation to the will, what is thus known is no longer the individual thing as such, but the Idea, the eternal form, the immediate objectivity of the will at this grade. Thus at the same time, the person who is involved in this perception is no longer an individual, for in such perception the individual has lost himself; he is pure will-less, painless, timeless subject of knowledge. [2]

Schopenhauer went on to cite Byron's experience of the oneness of landscape and soul in Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, and the utterance of Brahman in the Upanishads: "I am all this creation collectively, and besides me there exists no other being." [3] The Upanishads or Vedanta presented the absolute, Brahman, as the imperishable soul (atman) that exists behind all appearances as the ground of everything. It was this reality that Schopenhauer identified with the state of consciousness achieved in aesthetic experience. But art was less permanent than the renunciant's way of denying the will. Art, in the end, was not equal to religion, but a passing version of it.

Certain versions of Buddhism have accorded an important place to artistic practice, regarding activities like painting, pottery, calligraphy, flower arrangement, gardening, and the performance of the tea ceremony meditative forms of practice. Making things and doing things can be absorptive activities that release the mind from its attachments and train it to attend singularly to immediate tasks, without the flitting distractions the Dhammapada noted. But it is important not to mistake the purpose of these creative forms of meditation. They are not merely an alternative way of making art. Buddhism is often romanticized by those who wish to see in it no more than a serene aesthetic and amusingly paradoxical witticisms. This fantasized version of Buddhism is never up to the challenge of actual practice. Skimming the mere look of Buddhism (or any religion) from the torso of lived practice is something that art — in tandem with commerce — is all too capable of doing. Artists, curators, and art historians are sometimes happy to indulge in aestheticizing a religion because they operate on the presumption that art is neatly separable from religion, as if art were the flower to be plucked from the otherwise irrelevant plant of pious practice.

Is that what we encounter in the ten silent moments of Kimsooja's video? Are we urged to clip from Buddhism or Hinduism or from the daily life of an anonymous laborer some universal essence that can be imported into the marketplace of our lives and appropriated as if it were a commodity in global tourist trade? Does she invite us to peel off the picturesque exterior of a life-world and chuck the irrelevant innards into the passing river — all in the liberal name of Art? These are important questions to ask in the age of hyper-capitalism, when anything may be commoditized to supply the self-construction of inexhaustibly acquisitive consumers. Is nothing sacred? Absolutely not, the marketplace answers.

An instructive catalogue essay by Elizabeth Brown informs us that the figure at riverside is not a laundry woman, but the artist herself. [4] The artist also appeared as herself in *A Needle Woman*, having herself spent several years engaged in the practice of needlework. These videos are not, therefore, ethnographic documents. *A Laundry Woman* is the artist's portrayal of a laborer who watches fragments of a Hindu funeral

rite pass by her on the river's murky surface, contemplating human fate (as she told Brown). The artist constructs the work of art as a literal projection of herself into the place of another, and invites viewers to follow her lead. In doing so, she acts on the belief that the human situation as diagnosed by Hinduism or by Buddhism is also available to the rigors of artistic practice. She may assume that the boundaries separating the two are blurred. The AWAKE project, in which Kimsooja has participated, asserts in its webpage, that Buddhism need not be construed as a religion, but as a science of the mind, whose principles, it follows, can be productively exported and applied by non-Buddhists in works of art.<sup>[5]</sup>

If Buddhism's analysis of human consciousness produces penetrating insights, particularly insights that are comparable in striking ways to artistic practice, is it an act of cultural skimming for artists to act like Buddhists (or Hindus or Christians or Zoroastrians)? As the brief foray into the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer might suggest, the modern project of establishing the independently revelatory power of art and the autonomy of artistic genius argues resolutely that aesthetic experience is an embodied operation that parallels religious experience because it proceeds from the underlying structure of human consciousness. Religion happens the way it does, like art in its right, because of the nature of the mind-body on which they are built as human activities. But Schopenhauer did not propose a religion of art. He regarded art as a consolation, not an explanation of life or a therapy for curing its ills. Art is no other than the short-lived result of looking at the world disinterestedly, aesthetically. Art, therefore, cannot claim to get things more right than religion, any more than the reverse, but only differently.

If there is any truth to this, Kimsooja is not acting like a Hindu or Buddhist in her video (she was born in Korea, but is not a practicing Buddhist). By paring itself away to the silent presence of a painting, as suggested above, the video recalls Korean or Chinese ink paintings of poets lost in thought before mist-covered lakes. Yet the video exchanges the aristocrat-poet for a common laborer, perhaps in order to urge that enlightenment is for everyone, not just poets and artists. A Laundry Woman immerses the viewer, any viewer, in a sustained act of looking, an absorbed state in which consciousness fills up with the object of perception such that one no longer thinks about what one sees, but think asit, having overcome the subject-object distinction that Schopenhauer identified as the basic structure of rational knowledge or reason. In this absorbed state of mind, which one finds in all religions as well as in the transfixed stare of the beach comber, the ego and its small sphere of suffering fade blissfully away.

We have in this slowly moving visual field only a single frame, which is repeatedly penetrated by flotsam and gentle eddies. The mind is directed to the world off-screen, the world we can only infer by the passing objects and shimmering reflections that appear and then vanish. At its undisciplined level, human consciousness is just this single frame, a fragile apparatus imposed on a welter of events. But the discipline of looking that art and meditation pursue brings the viewer to rest, suspends one in silence to find the world taking shape in the small bounds of the human frame. As Buddha put it in a famous sermon, "Within this fathom-long sentient body itself, I postulate the world, the arising of the world, the cessation of the world, and the path leading to the cessation of the world."<sup>[6]</sup> The instrument of suffering is also the instrument to end suffering.

For the millions of people who worship Buddha as a divine being who assists them in attaining higher rebirth and progressing toward ultimate release, Buddhism is clearly a religion. For others, however, Buddhist meditation is essentially a science of mind, and not a religion. For the latter, art-making and viewing may act as a non-religious form of meditation. Although he may have separated art and life more than many artists today would prefer, Schopenhauer regarded art as a way of looking at life. As such, art is a special form of consciousness, operating like meditation and teaching us to simplify our lives and to loosen the hold that our fears and desires exert over us. Such art does not save us. It is not a religion. But like meditation, it can help us see clearly.

Art may not last long in its brief epiphanies. As I've tried to suggest, that is because its task is different than religion's. Art is sensuous thinking, what might be called embodied or sensate cognition. It thinks in the sensations that flood the field of perception and it seeks to change and deepen the registers of thought and feeling that we bring to our experience — all experience. Religion also traffics in transcendence, but its final

aim is to keep us there — whether it is in this world or the next. Given this similar content, it is not surprising that religion has always made use of art (for this reason and many others) or that artists find fascinating parallels between their creative practices and those of religious believers. But the two are not reducible to one another. Kimsooja is not trying to make believers of us, but better seers.

#### Notes

1. The Dhammapada: The Path of Perfection, tr. Juan Mascaró (London: Penguin, 1973), 40. [> return to article >](#)
2. Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, tr. E. F. J. Payne, 2 vols. (New York: Dover, 1969), vol. 1, 178-79, §34. Emphasis in original. [> return to article >](#)
3. *Ibid.*, 181. [> return to article >](#)
4. Elizabeth A. Brown, “Exploring WOW; or, How Works of Art Work,” in *WOW: The Work of the Work*, exhibition catalogue (Seattle : Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, 2005), 15. [> return to article >](#)
5. [www.artandbuddhism.org](http://www.artandbuddhism.org), p. 1. [> return to article >](#)
6. In the Pali canon’s *Aṅguttara-nikāya*, quoted in Walpola Sri Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1997), 42. [> return to article >](#)

From *Curator: The Museum Journal*, vol. 49, no. 3 (2006): 295-300. David Morgan.

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