



Kimsooja's Bottari and Her Journey

Sun Jung Kim, 2001

Bottari is the traditional wrapping cloth of Korea. Bottari, or bundle, has had many uses. Traditionally made by women of all classes of society, they were used to cover food and store things, wrap clothing, move house, or for sending as gifts and other precious items. One translation of bottari is 'wrapping luggage with a wrapping cloth'. Such cloths may be embroidered, painted, made from oiled paper, patchwork, or just plain cloth. The most popular wrapping cloths used patchwork designs, and were made from small pieces of discarded scraps. Similar to the practice of quilting, these bottaris were made by stitching patches of bright cloth onto the surface of a blanket. A simple sheet could be transformed into a colourful blanket, and later used as a bed cover. Kimsooja is a Korean artist who has deliberately chosen to work with the meanings and traditions of bottari made by ordinary people, so as to create new works of art. As the artist related to me in my interview with her:

'As a medium, bottari is traditionally feminine. In Korean, the expression to 'bundle up a bottari' means that a woman has lost her status in the household and has been forced out. Bottari also has significance as a container, or vessel, for carrying and transporting all sorts of goods. It can be unwrapped just as it can be bundled up, and in this regard I see our body as being, in the subtlest kind of way, a kind of bottari'. [1]

In this essay, I will discuss some of the ways in which Kimsooja has used bottaris in her work, and also touch on some feminist elements that are implicated in her practice. My discussion can be viewed within the context and transformations that have taken place in her work since the 1980s.

Korean women are taught from an early age to sew and develop needlework skills. Consequently, making wrapping cloths can never be separated from women's everyday life, just as the blankets and bedclothes they make are indispensable objects in daily use. As such, bottaris hold a special place for 'conveying buried memories and pain, as well as life's quiet passions'. [2] Blankets and bedclothes offer a place for rest when one is tired. As humans, we are born on a blanket and die in one. Cloth protects and decorates: it is an essential element of life. The blanket is a site for human life and a place of its joy, anger, grief and pleasure. In Korea, traditional folk belief suggests that good luck and happiness can be preserved inside the cloth. The patterns on the blanket are ornaments and symbols that encompass our aspirations, such as fertility, health and longevity. The colours also have symbolic meaning. [3]

As I have already mentioned, Kimsooja is an artist who has visually and consciously combined tradition with contemporary art in an effective way. In my view, many contemporary artists have tried to offer new ways of working with conventional materials and concepts, whilst still retaining their traditional distinctive character, but I think none have been as successful as Kimsooja. In many works, women artists refer to the traditional labour associated with sewing and material. They introduce craft skills such as quilting and knitting into their work, and these elements have often referred to their individual lives and memories. This approach has been associated with tendencies in feminist art, but I do not think I would define Kimsooja simply as a feminist artist, although feminist traits can be found in her work.

The Works Prior to Bottari

Kimsooja graduated from an art college and graduate school in Korea in the 1970s. At that time, 'monochrome' was the dominant form of art, along with other styles and experiments. During her studies, Kim was mainly influenced by formalism and conceptual art and, keeping these various trends of modern art in mind, her conceptual work was initially concerned with questions of 'the surface'. Although she experimented with various styles and expressions, she struggled to expand her vision and find her voice. In 1983, an incident occurred which had a new and lasting influence on her work. While sewing a blanket with her mother, Kim gained a new insight into cloth. She experienced a feeling of complete immersion in the realm of infinity. This experience led her to experiment with cloth and its surface, and resulted in a two dimensional work which she has described as follows:

'In the midst of a common act of sewing blankets with my mother, I had a clandestine and surprising experience in which all of my senses, thoughts and activities all coincided with one another. In this experience, I discovered the possibility that so many memories, pains and affection of life buried unnoticed so far could be connoted in it. I was totally fascinated by the lines of longitude and latitude as the basic structure of cloth; its primordial colour; the feeling of identity between the cloth and me while it was being sewn; and the curious nostalgia evoked by those things'. [4]

While sewing blankets, Kim found a new possibility of overcoming the limits of the two dimensional surface through the process of moving the needle above and beneath the cloth, and began to use this experience in her work. Such works were significant in that they connected women's everyday life to artwork through the use of the material of cloth and the activity of sewing. Many Korean women artists use 'sewing' in their work, while others reference the human body. Kimsooja's early works use sewing as representative of

these early ideas about women's work and labour. More recently, she has consciously used the body:

'I regard bottari as the body itself. Like bottari, which can be bundled and unwrapped, the presence of the body lingers and departs. The cloth, in my view, is like our skin'. [5]
For me, her sewing works evoke a sense of femininity, labour and healing. However, there is also a difference between Kimsooja's early work and many other feminist art forms, since she uses fabric as a canvas, which is a surface. In addition, she uses needlework as a tool, which asks endless questions on this border of surface, trying to identify the subject and the object.

In the 1980s, many Korean artists began to escape from the formalist, minimal monochrome art of the 1970s and related their works to social issues. They began to treat reality as a basis for a critical practice that represented social and political ideas. These practices presented a resistance to existing art activities and to the social system. The Minjoong Art movement was established by a number of Korean artists who shared these ideals. [6]

As a consequence many artists turned their backs on the individualistic works of the 1970s and began to deal with real life, to develop a critical vision about their society and its politics. One of the great influences of Minjoong Art was that it made people think about art in terms of communication. Kimsooja's introduction of everyday life into her practice through sewing processes can be seen as a result of this influence. But she never joined the group, since she did not agree with group activism and the fixed ideas, systems and power it holds over the individual. She continued to work on pieces in which canvas and painting were replaced by cloth and sewing. Such works can be described as modernist, in that the work of sewing and cloth was done within the two dimensional surface.

The act of sewing necessarily accompanies the material of cloth. The action is repeated across the surface above and beneath. Kim attempted to overcome the limitations of the 'surface' through repetitive horizontal and vertical stitching. Paints were applied over the colours and patterns of the cloth with brush strokes, line drawings and stitched marks. These showed the variation of space. The action of sewing enabled the artist to interact with the material of cloth. In sewing, Kim engages with the surface, simultaneously extending the space. I think that the introduction of cloth and sewing into her artwork brings the realm of the feminine into the art world, and overcomes the exclusion of ideas and practices that were prevented by modernism in a Confucian society. Kim seeks to transcend gender difference and to celebrate the universal value of the human being.

Kim also produced collage works that used cloth and needle instead of canvas and paint. Although she added drawing or paint to the cloth in "Dans Ma Chambre" (1988), the cloth work still sticks to the square surface.

Since the early 1990s, Kim has wrapped her objects, using the title "Deductive Object". In such works, Kim wrapped the cloth or hung it around common objects such as farming tools, sticks, ladders and laundry bars.

These works were significant in that Kim attempted to escape materiality and the frame imposed upon it by the painting. She still called these attempts 'deductive' because she wanted to get out of her earlier inductive works, in which materials were assembled and connected by sewing. Deductive works reconfirm the structure of the object through the activity of wrapping it. As Kim has observed:

'With my objects, it's as though I'm bandaging a wound. I wrap the object as if I was treating a wound, and through the wrapping and bandaging, the objects are transformed into something feminine'. [7]

The two dimensional frame of painting was left behind. A freer placement of shapes and objects on the wall was now possible. As the critic Oh Kwang Soo remarked:

'Even though there still remains the concept of her early paintings that are hung on the wall, most of Kimsooja's works bear strong tendency toward three dimensionality. Although still wary of the wall, Kim's work is a world of painting turning its back on reality, out of the illusion and into the direct reality. Therefore, her works got out of the concept of painting or drawing and consisted of stitching, weaving or wrapping direct materials. In these works, Kim stresses the meaning of assemblage of things rather than just sewing them together, while her early works consisted of quilts'. [8]

This commentary suggests that Kimsooja's work deals with the relationship between the cloth and the space in addition to revealing the cloth as cloth. Cloth has a number of purposes and meanings for people, whether as blankets or as clothes. Other than a visible meaning, an invisible meaning also exists within the cloth. Ancestors of the Korean people believed in transmigrations and the invisible spirit. For these ancestors, cloth is the best material to convey the spirit. I think that Kim evokes the immaterial through the materiality of cloth. Just as she had once experienced the feeling of unity with her mother through sewing together, Kim 'converses' with an invisible being through the medium of cloth.

In her P.S.1 studio residency in America (1992 and 1993), a series of works stretched the limits of merely experimenting with Korean material. This can be seen in one of the Deductive Object pieces made in 1993. Kim collected a large amount of cloth and transformed it into assemblages. These moved from the form of painting stuck inside the square frame to the three-dimensional form of the object, and then into space.

"Mind and the World" illustrates this gradual development. In this oval shaped work, a pile of cloth was attached and stacked to the wall. Bamboo was connected to the pieces on the floor and on the wall. Different clothes were arranged in an oval shape and placed on the wall. Pieces of bamboo were wrapped with cloth as a supporting element. The use of bamboo reminds me of a needle form. In earlier works, this needle form was only visible as the trace of a thread it left behind, but in Mind and the World, the needle takes on multiple meanings. It connects the work and the earth, the artist's and the viewer's mind. The original function of a needle is to connect patches of cloth, but Kim uses it as a vertical force in horizontal space. All the works she made previously seem to converge, thereby establishing themselves as a new force. In my view, Mind and the World is a work of total harmony as it brings together all elements: assemblage, sewing and winding, shape and colour.

Many "Deductive Object" works were produced and contributed to new installation practice. In the one made for the 5th Istanbul Biennale, entitled Deductive Object - dedicated to my marriage, patches of crushed cloth were pushed into the cracks of the wall in her studio, creating an autobiographical message through the use of traditional Korean clothes or cloth. For the first time, she completed a work by utilizing the whole space of her studio. Both the form of placement and the relationship between artwork and space was changed. America profoundly affected Kim's practice in several different ways. Firstly, she expanded the concept of space and secondly, bamboo stood in for the structural qualities and metaphoric possibilities of a needle form.

Bottari

The bottari reappeared, as Kim noted:

'The bottari has always been around us. The bottari was in my studio even before I worked on it. I just did not notice it. Then, when I happened to turn my face accidentally in the P.S.1 studio, the bottari was there. I myself did not notice the patches of cloth wrapped in a bottari that I had intended to use for cloth work. That bottari was a totally new one. It was surely a sculpture and a painting'. [9]

Having abandoned the idea of placing cloth only within a frame, Kim wrapped a variety of objects, placing them on the floor and the wall. Although similar to the artist Christo in terms of the action of wrapping, Kim's wrapping work stresses the connection with everyday experience.

The bottari was defined as crossing the boundary between painting and sculpture. Kim's work was no longer a matter of form and composition but began to unfold in a different dimension, in much the same way Marcel Duchamp could no longer be a futurist painter after inventing the readymade. Bottari, however, is an ambiguous object that cannot be construed simply as a readymade. Unlike the transformation of industrial products, such as bicycle wheels or toilets, into works of art as a result of the artist's choice, signature and exhibition, there is no boundary between the bottari as a work of art and as a common object. [10]

The Essence of Bottari

The common function of bottari is twofold. They are used for official functions and ceremonies, and by ordinary people to store, wrap, and carry things when on the move. Kimsooja's bottari works embrace the activity of wrapping as a sign of being on the move, as well as functioning as a 'real' bottari containing patches of cloth. The bottari in this context occupies an ambiguous position between life and art.

The bottari installed in a villa, contemporary gallery, museum, or outside in the world takes on very different meanings (see colour plate 9). The bottari is temporal in character. It is tied with bedclothes, but inside there are used clothes. Clothes contain individual memories, stains and smells, and the artist's experience, and exist as a part of the body. In human life, clothes have dual aspects of protection. They protect us from the cold and danger, and signify the wearer's taste. The activity of wrapping up clothes into a bottari can be interpreted in many ways. To wrap up means protection and confinement at the same time. The confinement signifies severance from the outside world. To wrap up also signifies a women's status in Korean society. As if wrapped up, Korean women are confined in the name of protection. The artist sees these blankets and bedclothes as places on which we are born and die, a foundational field which is the frame of our lives. To women, a blanket is a comfortable resting place during the night, while being related to the bed in a sexual sense as well. Women give birth to children on a blanket. Thus, it is a space where women continue human history. The blanket was also a symbol of oppression by Confucian morals and strict social ideology during the Chosun Dynasty (1392 - 1910). Within a social hierarchy that privileged men, women found pleasure and emotional survival through their needlework. Sewing was one of the few accepted activities that they could do. In a society in which the expression of colour was prohibited, Korean women used colour to decorate their blankets and bedclothes, and communicate their hope. At a time when bright colours were not allowed in ordinary life, the blanket could be as brilliant in colour as the women liked.

In her more recent work, Kimsooja allows bedclothes and blankets to take on a meaning of 'invitation'. By spreading a blanket across a table in a public restaurant, Kim's work quietly sneaks into the ordinary life of people eating and talking, outside the confines of a domestic interior. To place a bedcover on an eating table can be read as an attack on traditional custom. In Confucian society, men and women eating together in public was strictly taboo. They lived in separate quarters and the kitchen was located within the women's area. In Kim's 'used bedcover' work, the blanket acts as a sign of resistance against this convention. In this respect, I think Kimsooja is an example of an artist who questions convention and, by doing so, reveals the expressive power of an ordinary object such as bottari. I believe that Kim's life experience is accurately represented in the bottari. The conservative Confucian tradition, which influenced her youth, finds expression in her work. In the shade of men, Korean women are like shadows without existence. Women are responsible for domestic economy and Kim's work evokes something for me about middle aged women, (rather than women in general), and the renunciation of femininity. In other words, women appear as maternal beings who embrace and cure everything. Now the bottari no longer stays in a gallery environment, but is moved onto the top of a truck, into nature or becomes a shrine. In *A Laundry Field, Sewing into Walking, Looking into Sewing*, Kim hung bedcovers with laundry clips as if hanging real laundry. This bedcover installation occupied the whole space, and could be viewed from various angles. The work was used as a stage ornament for a dance performance. [\[11\]](#)

Video Works

Bedcovers and bottari are used as signs of a metaphorical and literal journey in Kimsooja's video works. In 1997, she traveled from Seoul through several other Korean cities, before returning again to Seoul. The journey took eleven days, and many bottari were loaded on the truck.

In *Cities on the Move - 2727 KM Bottari Truck*, the meanings of 'migration' and 'origin' are extended, as Kim traveled and 'performed' around the whole country. The video made en route was shown in *Cities on the Move*, an exhibition organised by Hans Ulrich Obrist and Hou Hanru. As I note from the title of the show, this whole curatorial project dealt with the topic of nomadism. *Cities on the Move - 2727 KM Bottari Truck* encapsulates two themes: the artist's memory of her early days when she had to move constantly (her father was a military man), and her current experience of traveling all over the world for artistic projects. This is a journey of body and soul together, and a journey into the memory and the past.

Usually a journey is a movement between places, but Kimsooja's journey shows the travel of time through the transition of places. The vertical concept of time is added to Kim's journey so that the journey in general becomes a linear movement between places. A similar work was made for the Venice Biennale in 1999. Kim's *Bottari Truck* is both a symbol for her journey to other cities and other worlds, and a comment on those displaced from their homelands. She identifies the bottari with herself. She faces herself in the front mirror of the truck, and confronts her past experiences. In all her video works, the identification with 'the journey into the other world' is constantly visualised.

In a video piece that records a performance in Delhi, Kim ended her identification with the bottari and made herself a needle sewing the earth, that is, *A Needle Woman*. This work shows how Kim identifies herself with the needle (see colour plate 10). She conceptualises the activity of sewing. While considering this activity as 'breathing or communication', she identifies walking and staring with sewing. *Mind and the World* was the first work in which this concept of sewing was stressed. In *Sewing into Walking*, Kim herself is a needle, connecting the bedcovers on the ground with the earth. In her video works, Kim deploys

used clothes, bottari and video monitors to connect the exhibition space and the viewers with the activity of sewing. The artist has said, 'previously thread and needle sewed cloth whereas this time my body is a medium that sews wide cloth that is nature'.

As we can see in this remark, Kim's needlework has evolved from the actual activity of sewing into conceptual sewing, revealing the relationship of intertwining without thread and needle. The artist sews the common life, environment and nature with her own body. This action replaces the needle. A needle can also be a tool that hurts, but it can be also be a tool that cures, as in Oriental medicine.

Kim is a needle that connects the body and the soul. Although the needle connects, it does not leave its trace. Kim herself becomes a needle to remove her own being. The responses of passersby are diverse: the pedestrians in Tokyo look totally disinterested; the occasionally looking back Chinese in Shanghai appear to be curious; and the Indians stop and stare at the artist. The artist is a needle that continues to sew her with passersby. In the repeated sewing, the artist disappears and nothing remains.

In *A Laundry Woman – Yamuna River, India*, made in India in 2000, Kim's empty state of mind appears more emphasized. In one scene, Kim meets the souls, as the remains of a burnt dead body passes by in front of her in the Yamuna River. Kim's body is slowly assimilated into the river. She is free from all thoughts and ideas and goes into a different state of mind. As in all her video works, her activity is minimal. Many stories are condensed as her works change from the bottari to the needle and then to nature. Kim once sewed the world with her body as medium, but now she tells us another story with her eye and mind. As Rosalind Krauss has observed, the real medium of video art is not the mechanical apparatus but the psychological circumstance. In Kim's video work, one can feel the state of being nothing and experience the correspondence with nature without any skill. [\[12\]](#)

In conclusion I believe that Kim positions her itinerary between life and death. She sees each sewing stitch as an endless itinerary. She is the needle that travels across the cloth. She once discovered this while sewing blankets with her mother, and then overcame the limitation of the two dimensional surface by sewing onto a blanket. In a progressive variation of bottari works, Kim developed the concept of journey or migration into *Cities on the Move - 2727 KM Bottari Truck*, then she evolved into *A Needle Woman*, and finally in her video works the needle is identified with the body. The thread has continuity and circularity. This aspect of continuity and circularity of life is apparent in her work. This also signifies transmigration in Buddhism.

Kimsooja's journey is not over yet.

Notes:

1. Kim SunJung, Interview with Four Korean Women Artists, Art AsiaPacific Vol. 3, 1996, p. 59.
2. Ibid. p. 60.
3. For further analysis on this subject, see Huh Donghwa's essay, History and art in traditional wrapping cloths, in Claire Roberts and Huh Donghwa (eds), Rapt in Colour: Korean textiles and costumes of the Chosen Dynasty (Sydney: Powerhouse Museum and The National Museum of Korean Embroidery, 1998) p. 21. I think it useful to quote one extract here as it impacts on how Kimsooja uses the meanings of bottari in her work; 'the warm colours represent the sun and blood, while blues and greens suggest the trees, grass, birth, growth and prosperity. These five colours correspond to the four points of the compass and the centre; the five elements of the weather (cold, warmth, wind, dryness and humidity); the five elements of the universe (wood, fire, metal, water and earth); the four seasonal differences (spring, summer, autumn and winter); and the five blessings (longevity, wealth, success, health and luck)'.
4. Taken from the artist's statement, Exhibition Catalogue, Gallery Hyundai, Seoul, 1988.
5. Ibid. p. 58.
6. Minjoong Art is a radical form of art fostered by the political upheaval during the 1980s. After the Kwangju Democratization Movement, many forms of social movement emerged and spread across the whole country. Naturally they had a strong impact on the new direction of art. Artists started to stand for anti-modernism and incorporated a new reflection of reality into their art. They also advocated direct comments and criticism of social events, and embraced group activities such as issuing manifestos and other publications.
7. Ibid. p. 60.
8. Oh Kwang Soo, A Return to the Archetype: Recent Works of Soo Ja Kim, essay for exhibition catalogue, Gallery Hyundai, Seoul, 1991.
9. Taken from the artist's statement, Exhibition Catalogue, Gallery Hyundai, 1988.
10. Kim Ai-Ryung, Sooja Kim, the Wrapping View of Art and Life, Wolgan Misool, October 1999, pp. 162-171.
11. Exhibition Catalogue, Video Installation by Kimsooja: A Needle Woman, 2000, ICC, Japan.
12. Ibid.

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