



Deductive Object, Manifests 1, 1996, Museum Boymans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam. Photo by Kim Byung-Won

Wrapping Bodies and Souls

Hans Ulrich Obrist, 1997

Hans Ulrich Obrist: *How did you start working with clothes?*

Soo-Ja Kim: In 1983, I spent some time sewing bed covers with my mother. At that time, I was looking for a proper methodology with which to examine both the ideas of surface and life. Painters always struggle with surfaces which, to me, seem like walls that we can hardly overcome. I wanted to overcome that wall and to reach the other side of its surface. When my grandmother passed away, I saved all the traditional Korean clothes she used to wear. They reminded me of her presence. Then, when I decided to create my own form of art by sewing, I started using these worn clothes as my preferred material.

HUO: *Was your grandmother close to you?*

SJK: Yes, her fascination with fabrics influenced me a lot; then, my mother taught me how to represent this closeness through my work. One day, while I was sewing a bed cover with my mother, I put a needle right in the middle of the texture of the fabric. At that moment, I realized that I had found the methodology I was searching for. In the texture of the fabric I discovered the answer to all my questions; in sewing I learned to nurture my emotions and pains.

HUO: *I'm very interested in the different uses of the same object and also by the different relations to clothes in eastern and western contexts. In Japan, when a grandmother or grandfather dies, the family saves the clothes: throwing away the clothes of a dead person is a taboo. In Europe it is very different, people want to get rid of them as soon as possible. How is it in Korea?*

SJK: In Korea they usually ceremonially burn cloths used by the dead person. But it really depends on the family; in my case I wanted to keep all the clothes with me.

HUO: *You often mention the relation between painting and sewing. Could we say, in terms of material too, that painting is a very male dominated form of expression?*

SJK: Yes, I think so. I was not conscious of doing "feminist work." But of course I do, as I live as a woman artist in a country like Korea. For me, the most important material is my life. I cannot escape from the feminist issue because that is my reality, but I don't want to define myself as a feminist artist; I would like to reach the totality of life and art.

HUO: *The issue of women artists is now emerging in Korea too. When I first visited Korea, it was very obvious that the most interesting work within the younger generation of contemporary artists, was being done by women...*

SJK: Yes, this is a very recent development. I, for example, try to solve my own difficulties and pressures within our society through my work, in a very indirect way.

HUO: *Tell me more about this notion of "wrapping the bundle."*

SJK: In Korean society, when we say "wrap the bundle," it generally means leaving or moving. My bundles, instead, have nowhere to go. Instead of wrapping the bundle for leaving, I prefer to accumulate them.

HUO: *The issue of clothes and the choice of material lead, somehow, to the question of the ready-made. You said that you exhibited clothes that have all already been used.*

SJK: I usually wrap clothing that has been used; so, in a way, it's like hugging the people who wore them.

HUO: *The frequent use you make of bedcovers is striking. The bed is basically the place where we are born and where we die.*

SJK: Yes, it is the basic field of birth and death. And the human body, the most complicated bundle, lies on and under this bedcover. Making bundles is like wrapping bodies and souls within your own skin. The skin represents another kind of fabric, while the bedcover is like our skin. It protects and isolates you from the world outside. It is hugging; it is rejecting.

HUO: *When you showed me the images of the work you exhibited at the Kwangju Biennial, the skin seemed to me to be a particular kind of fluid. The skin represents the barrier from the inside to the outside; but the skin is also a porous surface...*

SJK: Yes, it is always a question of going back and forth, in-between the woven fabric which is made of horizontal and vertical structures. Also, the process of sewing is composed of a series of vertical and horizontal acts, moving against and beyond the fabric itself.

HUO: *It is like sewing through boundaries.*

SJK: When you see the sewn work from the surface, it looks like a complete structure. But when you see the whole series of processes, they remind you more of a circulating spiral shape. My work, which is wrapping the fabric on the object, is a similar process to sewing. Sewing is like wrapping fabric with threads. Sewing also entails a series of circular processes, just like my objects and my installation with wrapped rings. This time, the ring sews the space itself.

HUO: *These big rings can be moved by people. It is very interesting to compare them to sewing: going from plane to round implies a transition. Could we say that the rings mark the moment when you actually go into the space and transform it in an installation?*

SJK: For me the process of wrapping and sewing is like holding or hugging with the intention of keeping things to myself. Whenever I make bundles, it's like inviting things to become part of my skin. Things can be visible but also invisible. It is really a symbolic act, more symbolic than actually wrapping and binding.

HUO: *When I saw your bundles I thought of migration in terms of homelessness, refugees, or immigrants of all sort, a nomadic population with all of their objects and belongings carried in the bundle.*

SJK: In the modern society, bundles have been changing into bags. For me this is like a symbolic ghost that can't be thrown away; a ghost representing our life. A bundle is the minimum we carry through our lives. When I was little, we moved a lot from village to village, city to city, and it influences my work. This is a nomadic body of work.

HUO: *Jonas Mekas distinguishes the voluntary migrant from the involuntary migrant, the refugee, the person who is not able to choose his/her emigrating destiny. In a conversation I had with Paul Virilio, he talked about all these travelers, homeless, refugees, and about an increasingly mobile society. How do you feel about this notion of migration right now?*

SJK: It is linked to the opening up of a world of information and a world of interaction between cultures and people. A global sewing... But it seems also to be a question of the hesitation of living here or not, of being or not being; that is why there is all this moving around.

HUO: *So one could say that, somehow, it's all a general "in-between-ness." Jean-Luc Godard said: "everything is in between."*

SJK: I think so too. We can be in, we can be out. I wrap my bundle, I open it up, as I need... When I feel full of energy, I open up my bundles, as I need them, to liberate and release my body. When I did a wall piece at P.S. 1 in New York, I put small pieces of fabrics into the holes of the wall and it was like burying fragments of my body. After taking out the fabrics, I felt as though I was being released from the wall, from the intensity. I am very fascinated by that kind of energy that flows in between an object and myself.

HUO: *In your most recent work, the object seems always related to the subject. People are encouraged to walk on your piece, or to open the bundles, where they are allowed to put some of the clothes and make their own monuments. In the piece you made in Edinburgh for the cafeteria you covered the table with bed covers: the objects seem increasingly placed in relation to people.*

SJK: You are talking about *Information and Reality*, the show at the Fruitmarket. I tried to invite people to express themselves right on the table cloths, communicating, eating, drinking, arranging glasses and dishes... Spreading bedcovers on the tables is like creating a canvas which is invisibly wrapping the whole space.

HUO: *How did it happen in the Kwangju installation with millions of people walking on it? Did it really work?*

SJK: I think so. I didn't imagine that so many people could interact within the installation. The visitors opened up all the bundles and took the clothes wrapped inside. At the beginning, I brought 2.5 tons of clothes, and almost 1 ton was taken away by the audiences. This was an outdoor project, but when I presented it in a museum the audience touched and took some fabrics from the bundles, even while the guards were there.

HUO: *At the exhibition in Nagoya you are showing the same thing in three different forms.*

SJK: On the floor at the entrance, I put several piles of used clothes; in between I installed some bundles; then I covered the piles with used Korean bedcovers: it was like putting my hands on dead bodies. For me, these

different stages of using fabrics represent three different kinds of planes. But they also represent three different stages of mind.

HUO: *Were the transitions fluid?*

SJK: Mostly. I also put Japanese clothes like Kimonos, and ordinary everyday Japanese clothes together, and I wrapped the bundles with Korean clothes. The day after the opening, somebody, I don't know who, came and spread one big sheet of Japanese cloth on the piles.

HUO: *On the Korean clothes?*

SJK: It seemed like that, yes.

HUO: *Were they initially separated?*

SJK: There were some Korean and Japanese clothes mixed together, but I think he or she considered it as a nationalistic statement.

HUO: *When I saw your bundles, I clearly understood that your work deals with the concept of participation. This is that notion of object-subject that, as we said, can be found in your work.*

SJK: The clothes spread on the mountain hill in Kwangju are meant to be like one big sheet of fabric covering nature. I let people walk on this fabric which is somewhere between nature and the body. Here our body represents the needle with which I am sewing the fabric of nature.

HUO: *I can see this notion also in those big photographs where the clothes seem to be like an organic element.*

SJK: In the work I did in 1994 for the show *Sewing into Walking* in Seoul, I tried to connect the concept of "sewing" to that of "walking." I transferred my concepts from the field of painting to that of daily life.

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