



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

Kimsooja, To Breathe: Invisible Mirror/Invisible Needle

Ricky D'Ambrose, May 2012

From blue to violet. The nine minutes of *To Breathe: Invisible Mirror/Invisible Needle* involve a lifecycle of the color spectrum, an electronic spiritual autobiography of red-yellow-blue sanctified at the four hard edges of the screen. These are colors that command, rather than pacify, the eye; the problem, to borrow Duchamp's phrase, of being "up to the neck in the retina," here becomes a compelling visual solution, an optical tease with metaphysical consequences. "My motivation for creating this piece was to question the depth of the surface," Kimsooja has said. "Where is the surface? What in the world is there between things?"

These migrating color fields, these on-screen anti-surfaces, frustrate the eye, if only temporarily; the effort here is to re-educate our visual intelligence, to make the eye more buoyant, less habituated. What Kimsooja calls her interest in in-betweens – in those enigmatic medial spaces that can be intuited but never experienced simultaneously – gives this work its itinerant sensibility, and it is this skepticism of the surface that disaffiliates *To Breathe* from a mid-twentieth-century aesthetics apotheosized by Barnett Newman, Ellsworth Kelly, Anne Truitt, Robert Ryman, etc. A more suitable list of aesthetic influences might include: magic lantern shows, Stan Brakhage films, Technicolor, stained glass windows, and also Cézanne, whose attraction to what he called "the meeting of planes in the sunlight" might describe another visual corollary to this work: the sensation, the flicker of colors, produced when staring at the sun with one's closed.

The two channels. The inhale-exhale component of the soundtrack forms its metrical unit: the couplet. The rhyming of inhale and exhale is made possible by an activity (breathing) which, in this instance, becomes increasingly less agile, more labored and urgent. Once the last exhale is replaced by the low, monophonic sound of humming, however, we assume that a change in condition has taken place, that a transaction between physical and spiritual experience has culminated in repose. And yet, Kimsooja's colors continue their gestation; the juxtaposition of an uninterrupted, trifurcated human hum and an image with no reliable surface and no discernable visual plane is the technique of a stereoscopic aesthetics. The effort is toward two radically dissociated channels of information that cannot be unified by the eye alone, but that require a bit of imaginative thinking and mental ingenuity to grant their coalescence.

But to think imaginatively entails a sensorial leap of faith and a transfiguration of the commonplace that often feels peculiar and difficult, but that is also necessarily clarifying and inventive. Hence the statement by Kimsooja: "I don't believe in creating something new but in inventing new perspectives based on mundane daily life." The result plays like an ecstatic vision; a flash of light and sound that transforms Duchamp's "retinal element" into an instrument – a needle to thread and combine, a mirror to duplicate and rhyme – for achieving the movement from surface to spirit.