



Aire de Fuego / Air of Fire, 2009, 5:02 loop, sound, still from Earth - Water - Fire - Air

KIMSOOJA | Tierra - Agua - Fuego - Aire / Earth - Water - Fire – Air

Oliva María Rubio

of sea, of fire, of dreams, of earth, of air. Miguel Hernández

For the 2009 5th Lanzarote Biennial, Kimsooja has undertaken a project of five videos, filmed entirely on the island of Lanzarote, that tackles the subject of the four elements that have been employed by philosophers since antiquity to describe the essential components of material reality and the source of all energy and life, both in Western traditions and in the East: earth, water, fire, and air. Always charged with great symbolism, the four elements which date back to the time of Pre-Socratic philosophers and later received a more precise explanation from Empedocles, persisted through the Middle Ages to modern times and profoundly influenced the development of European thought and culture. These Western conceptions coincide with Indian, Japanese, and Buddhist traditions, which like Aristotle added a fifth element, ether (or the container of the cosmos) and with the Buddhist tradition. In some Asian countries like Korea and China, air is substituted for wind.

Kimsooja has uncovered, in the volcanic, ocean landscape of the island of Lanzarote, the force and inspiration of these elements, the essential energy that we all depend on as living beings, as well as an invitation to fantasy and a source of creativity. Kimsooja compels us to see fire in water, earth in water, air in water, and therefore, also the opposite: water in air, water in earth, water in fire. In a way, as the artist notes, water alone would suffice to represent all four elements, even though one might imagine that each element admits only a singular and unique representation.

The first three videos: Fire of Earth; Water of Earth and Fire of Air, share a common "journey" and form a trilogy. They have been filmed in different moments of day and night, in slow motion, while the artist was driving through the rocky landscape of the island. Each one of these videos evokes the elements of fire, water, and air, respectively.

The first video, Fire of Earth, was filmed during the day, and depicts the island's daytime landscape. The camera leads us through the island's rocky scenery, and makes us feel the body of the earth as if it were a

skin. The camera's ample panoramic lens serves as a counterpoint to the partial vision of the nocturnal scene in the second video.

Here, the movement of the camera, sometimes sped up and other times slowed down, guides us through the rocky scene creating a trompe l'oeil effect: it looks as though the mountains in the background remain still, while the rocky terrain of the foreground moves faster, then slower, creating the illusion that the sea rocks, charred by the volcano's fire, are gliding across the landscape as if being dragged by a lava flow or a movement from deep inside the earth. At times, the mountains in the background also seem to move, but in the opposite direction as the foreground's rocky landscape; or that the fore is spinning, turning around the mountainous background in a circular motion of eternal return. The silence that envelopes everything and counters the ceaseless movement creates a mood of estrangement that is heightened by the moonscape of the boulder field, transmitting all the energy and spirituality of cosmic connection, typical of these extraordinary spaces.

The second video, *Water of Earth*, filmed at night and also in slow motion while driving, roams the nocturnal landscape of Lanzarote with a substantially different impact than the daytime film. Here we also encounter a trompe l'oeil effect. Again we experience the dynamic of mobility in the foreground and immobility in the background (in this case the sky), as in the daytime video, but here, the vista is obscured. In contrast with the complete view of the first video, our vision is now reduced by the darkness of night or absence of light. Also, due to the absence of light, the foreground takes on a larger role. Here the foreground stands out against the sky, and the mountains that appear during the daytime disappear almost completely into the background. In this video the effect of movement occurs on several levels and always flows in the same direction. Altogether it resembles a deep river of dark waters moving quickly in the background and sliding slowly into the foreground. The background is covered with scrub and rocky hills that appear like ghosts darkened by the night and almost completely fill the frame obscuring our view of the bottom. Sometimes the screen is pierced by poles or trees that pass across our field of vision like shooting stars. The varying degrees of acceleration evoke many other natural processes such as streams, floods, and rapids.

In the third video, *Fire of Air*, the artist illuminates the darkness with a spotlight while driving through the fields of volcanic rock. Focusing in on the center of the frame and leaving the rest of the screen dark, we see the blackness that envelops everything, except when the light collides with a physical object.

With the appearance and disappearance of light, and therefore the landscape, the images become unrecognizable. When the light appears, what we see is like a sort of swirling cloud, blowing in the wind. The night's darkness envelops everything until the light reappears. The light here is the source of energy that illuminates the space but is also absorbed by the darkness when it does not cross a physical object. Only when the light crosses or collides with something physical does it consume its energy. And as the artist herself notes, "darkness and distance play the roles of absorbing light in a vacuum and consuming the source/energy of light in physicality."

The appearance and disappearance of light creates an aura of mystery. The spotlight that the artist guides, like the sun lighting the earth, turns the landscape into something ethereal, abstract, resembling an eddy of clouds being swept away by the wind, spinning like a Ferris wheel of light. The rocky, nocturnal landscape of Lanzarote disappears and turns into a mass of light and clouds. Only every so often do tiny points of light appear on the horizon.

This trilogy speaks about how natural light and darkness, or lack of light, as well as the use of artificial light is associated with our modes of perception. In some way, it reveals how our visual reality is directly related to light, darkness, perspective, emptiness and physicality, simultaneously creating the mystery of our vision that goes beyond reality and lead us into the realm of fantasy. Fact and fiction are paired in these videos, opening our minds to a deeper reality that transcends habitual perceptions.

The movement of the earth, the movement of life, the acceleration and deceleration of events, the fleetingness of life... these elements also become manifest in contemplating this work.

This project is accompanied by two individual videos, *Air of Fire* and *Earth of Water*, which focus on the elements water and air and the energy generated when both come into play. To do this, Kimsooja selects two particular moments in the continuous movement of the sea and the undulating waves produced by air currents.

In the first, *Air of Fire*, the artist selects a segment of sea where the ocean joins with the earth on a cliff of black volcanic rock to depict the beautiful spectacle of a rainbow forming. When the waves of white foam, propelled by the wind, collide with the cliff, breaking and jumping through the air, the colors of the rainbow appear in their entire splendor. These waves soar to the top of the cliff, dispersing droplets as if to revive the fields of volcanic rock. In the middle of the video, the picture disappears from the screen and it goes black, leaving on our retina the image of the waves and rainbow, while we continue to hear the sound of water crashing against the cliff and dispersing with the force of the air. This separation of image and sound shows how meaning is created and reconstructed at the intersection of the auditory and visual senses. The sound of the waves breaking on the cliff, the beauty of foam leaping through the air, the appearance of a rainbow set against dark rocks, all of this is a hymn to the glory of nature, but it also drives us to question the mystery of creation.

In the second video, *Earth of Water*, Kimsooja films another section of the sea, framed as if it were a living painting. Rolling waves, continually shifting the movement and form of their own landscape, create a hypnotic mood that is enhanced by the gray scale of the sea's natural palette. One wave, gentle and repetitive, like a harmonious melody, rippling the sea.

Through these five videos in Lanzarote together with living volcanic and the sky scene in Guatemala that will be evolved in the future, the artist employs the reality of landscape and its materiality in order to transform beyond it. Juxtaposing fact and imagination, she imbues the series with elements of ambivalence and mystery. These works convey our diverse modes of perception and the creation of new meanings.

Oliva María Rubio is an art historian, curator, and writer, who has been director of exhibitions at La Fábrica, since 2004. She was the Artistic Director of PHotoEspaña (PHE), an International Festival of Photography and Visual Arts celebrated in Madrid (2001-2003), where she programmed around 60 exhibitions. She is a member of numerous juries on art and photography, and a member of the Committee of Visual Arts "Culture 2000 programme", European Commission, Culture, Audiovisual Policy and Sport, Brussels (2003), the Purchasing Committee at Fonds National d'Art Contemporain (FNAC), Paris 2004-2006, and artistic advisor of the Prix de Photography at Fondation HSBC pour la Photographie, Paris, 2005.

Oliva María Rubio is also the author of *La mirada interior. El surrealismo y la pintura* (Madrid, Tecnos, 1994), and writes articles for catalogues, magazines and newspapers. She recently curated Kimsooja's exhibition at Crystal Palace, Madrid, in collaboration with the Reina Sofia Museum, and the travelling show of Andres Serrano: *Salt on the wound*, 2006.

She was the curator of Kimsooja's *To Breathe: A Mirror Woman* at the Crystal Palace, organized by Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in 2006.