



A Needle Woman – Mexico City, 2001.

## Passages and Places - The City

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David Claerbout's work *Shadow Piece* opens the view from the inside to the outside, from the house to the street. Streets and houses shape the city. The city is a space. Michel de Certeau describes space as "a web of movable elements. It is to a certain extent filled by the totality of the movements that unfold within it. It is therefore a result of activities that give it a direction, that temporalize it." [1] This result doesn't yet define identity and unity; the city manifests itself as "a single mass of pedestrians..., a web of slapdash, out-of-the-way accommodations, a traversing of your assumed own places and a universe of rented places, which are beset by a non-place or dreamed-up places." [2] Our concepts are not clear. Do place and space stand in relation to each other like house and place to the street, like standing-still to going on, like the closed to the open? Does the place at first seem to us to be something stable and motionless, only a point at which we come to a halt and where we linger? But as soon as something happens at the location and with the location, i.e., a movement, it expands, becomes a space that leads to other spaces. Places have the most diverse functions. They divide up the protected area I can retreat to. They are also public zones that I share with others, places where I meet confidants just as much as places that are transitory and anonymous. Places can be places of passage, transit rooms, railway stations, ticket offices, where people pass each other, where they disperse to other parts of the city via a network of streets. The city is not merely a sequence of places and not a static geometry of streets. It is, repeatedly, a newly created movement in time and space, in which the different processes of walking come together: the goal-oriented, or meandering and strolling walk, walking around, passing-by, lingering. The city happens. In a fancy-free stroll through Paris, the French situationists à la Guy Debord created another, open structure of experience, i.e., their own changing topography of the city beyond any fixed plan. The activity of pedestrians who take over the city space generates an urban network, provides the city with energy and determines its

velocity. The reality of growing cities encompasses both the sedentary and the nomadic. It's a reality that can bear me up or isolate me. A café, a street, a quarter are familiar to me, but at the next corner I am already a stranger. The city is like an organism, which is held together in some way or other that I cannot really make out. In order to move around in the city, I have to constantly tear up my roots; in walking, I disengage myself from a place and fail to reach it. Some live in the city; they remain, they wait, have in fact not arrived, remain underway.

In her four-channel video installation *A Needle Woman* from 2000-2001 (Fig. p. 110/111), Kimsooja stands with her back to the viewer as a stationary, vertical axis in the heart of four metropolises: Mexico City, Cairo, Lagos and London, in a stream of people who meet her and go past her. At first the viewer takes in the waves of intermingling passersby, the continuum of urban life, into which the artist has plunged. In the midst of the mass movement, the artist appears, in her own words, to be a "barometer", a "witness", a "compass", a "surveying pin" that records the different cultures. [3] Like a pin, she pricks into the colorful social tissue of the cities, sews different societies together. [4] Kimsooja sees the pin as an extension of her body; she overcomes in-between spaces and disappears again. The thread remains as a binding and mediating trace of the ghost in the tissue's weave. [5]

The fact that people always move in the same way seems to blend cities into a global unconcern in which the artist surfaces at random, alternating locations, but a closer look also shows peoples' social identities in differing hierarchies, classes, relations to each other, different reactions to the artist that are noted or avoided and ignored. In London's cosmopolitan bustle, people walk around self-engrossed, unreceptive, single-minded. In Lagos they react with curiosity, laughter, irritation. In one city, Kimsooja becomes transparent, almost vanishes; in the other she appears as a counterpart. She is both present and absent, part of the cities' space and time and outside of that space and that time. She obviously stands in the way as a physical impediment and yet her physical existence is ignored. She meets the others and is isolated; she is divided from the life of the others and in the same way integrated in the passage of that life. The viewer looks at the back of the artist, takes up her position and also that of the people who go past her, tries to imagine Kimsooja's face that radiates self-confidence and the safety in staying within the flow of passing life. Even when she is a perceived object, her inner nature remains closed to the others. She is the observer as such, not only of what happens around her, but also of the processes that go on inside her.

The speed of the video has been reduced by 50 percent. By means of this prolongation, time, the artist's encounters, the flow of people, stationary and fleeting time -all are more intensely experienced. The artist is the indicator of time and space; both make up a unit, both are physical. "Although, when I place my motionless body in space as a vertical axis, I create a form of timelessness, I simultaneously open up another movement: it is a vertical movement directed inwards; time in the form of consolidation. We cannot separate the coexistence of time and corporeality and therefore of spatiality; they will always belong together." [6] *A Needle Woman* thus transmits three perceptions of time, standing still in the body of the artist in which past, present and future meet, which, in comparison and despite the slowdown, incorporates the visible speed of the other passing figures plus the perspective of the viewers, who stand respectively for real-time.

Kimsooja, on the one hand, opposes the acceleration of life; her motionlessness highlights the floundering, empty movement and temporal mechanism of the human stream around her. But it is also possible to see this the other way around. In this case the unceasing, endless wave of people is the stationary and enduring part and the artist is the existence that is in motion, will go on, pass away, decompose and disappear. Kimsooja speaks of the finitude and infinity of being. We are in time and timeless; we are transient and without any durable substance and thus also have access to and an experience of delimitation, of transcendence or going beyond time.

Although the nomadic lifestyle is a characteristic phenomena of this era, it could also be one's choice; we can still live without moving around much and be rooted in one's own place. Human curiosity and the desire

for communication expands its physical dimension and happens to control human relationships and the desire for possessions, and pursuing the establishment of a global community, which includes the virtual world. But a true nomadic life wouldn't need many possessions, or control and it doesn't need to conquer any territory; it's rather an opposite way of living from a contemporary lifestyle, with the least amount of possessions, no fear of disconnection, and being free from the desire of establishment. It is a lifestyle that is a witness of nature and life, as a kind of process of a pilgrim. Nomadism in contemporary society seems to be motivated from the restless desire of human beings and its follies, rather than pursuing true meaning from nomadic life.

Notes:

1. Kimsooja, in: Art and Context, Summer 2006.
2. Michel de Certeau, "L'invention du quotidien",
3. Ibid.
4. See Kimsooja im Gespräch mit Doris von Drathen, in: Kimsooja. Künstler. Kritisches Lexikon der Gegenwartskunst, edition 4, no. 12, 2006, p.14.
5. Ibid.
6. See the statements by Kimsooja in an interview with Nicolas Bourriaud in: Kimsooja. Conditions of Humanity, cat. Musée d'art contemporain de Lyon/museum kunst palast, Düsseldorf 2003/2004, p. 56

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