



A Needle Woman, Sana (Yemen), 2005

An Interview with Kimsooja

Olivia Sand, 2006

Kimsooja came to international fame in the 1990's following a P.S.1 residency in New York, which paved the way for one of her most famous pieces to date, *Bottari Truck*, a video that was subsequently shown in numerous exhibitions and biennales. *Bottari Truck* consisted of a truck loaded with *bottari*, the Korean word for bundle, and traveled throughout Korea for 11 days. The bundles were actually made of bed covers, an item accompanying the key moments of our existence from birth, marriage, sickness, to death. *A Needle Woman*, a video performance showing the artist from the back standing in the middle of a mainstream avenue in various cities throughout the world, further developed the concept of sewing towards abstraction bringing together people, cultures and civilizations. In a subtle way Kimsooja (b. 1957 in Korea), who works primarily in video, performance, installation, and photography has advanced to a premier artist in her discipline taking up sensitive issues like migration, integration or poverty. Besides taking us on her journey, Kimsooja's work is an invitation to question our existence, and the major challenges we are facing. In the interview below, she looks back at the past decade, and discusses her latest projects and undertakings. Olivia Sand reports.

Asian Art Newspaper: Certain pieces you completed are seminal pieces (see above), and have toured numerous biennales and museums over past years. What makes these pieces so important and why do you think people feel attracted to them?

Kimsooja: The formal and the aesthetic aspects may draw people to these pieces, but I believe their success is also based on their content and the topics they address. Today, it seems that we are witnessing a 'cultural war' with many, issues arising in a global context bringing together different races and beliefs with an increasing discrepancy between rich and poor, economically powerful and less powerful countries. Needless

to say, the present power structure causes many problems and disasters around the world. The issues that I address in *Bottari Truck* and *A Needle Woman* are very much related to current topics, such as migration, refugees, war, cultural conflict, and different identities. I think people are interested in considering these topics through the reality of the work; this may be one reason for their success. In addition, the aesthetics and some elements of the form in *A Needle Woman*, for example, are things with which people can identify. The piece demonstrates a different approach towards performance compared to what has been done in performance so far. It is a different format and a different perspective from a 'classical' performance, where the artist is 'doing' an action. I believe that you can connect people and bring them together to question our condition without aggressive actions.

AAN: You learnt to sew with your family. Is sewing actually the element that led you to pursue an artistic career, ultimately serving as a means of expression, which remains to this day in your work?

KS: Definitely. The practice and my concept of sewing represent the constant basis of all of my work, from the beginning until today. The concept of sewing is always redefined, redeveloped and regenerated in different forms. After sewing pieces on the wall, or the *Bottari* pieces, which represent another way of three-dimensional sewing, I began to connect the relationship between people, my body, and another way — actually an invisible way — of sewing, like weaving the fabric of society and culture for example. My practice of sewing is always evolving, generating new ideas to redefine concepts.

AAN: You recently started a website, www.kimsooja.com. While presenting the site, you come to the conclusion that 'a one word name is an anarchist's name'. What do you mean by that?

KS: I do not think of myself as an anarchist with any critical political meaning. I see myself as a completely independent person, independent from any belief, country, or religious background. I want to stand as a free individual, who is open to the world. I had thought about starting a website for some time, but I was reluctant to do so because of the commercial aspect linked to such an undertaking. One day, however, I decided to move forward, and I began to carefully think about a website address. With the rapid growth of the internet, an email address is the key to getting access to the world to a universe without boundaries. I wanted to present myself as a free individual from any connotations (which exist around a name — the affiliation through marriage, for example), but not as an aggressive anarchist activist trying to change the world.

AAN: On your website you talk about 'twisted information', and your desire to promote ideas that have not been given the importance they deserve. To what are you referring?

KS: I realize that the media cannot be objective towards all the topics they cover, and personal points of view and experiences are also of great importance in the way the news is presented. However, I frequently witnessed how the media failed to acknowledge the relevance of an artist, which also resulted in ignoring or misunderstanding some of their existing art works. Through the website, which I launched in 2003, my goal was to open a forum for people to communicate openly and honestly about the art world, and the world in general. I am aware that it is a very modest undertaking, but I nevertheless wanted to offer a place where people could share their thoughts. All too often, people find themselves in a situation where they have no power, where they are manipulated, and they have no means to access or reveal the truth. So far, there have not been many people from the curatorial side, but there are many ordinary people, and a few artists, who use the site.

AAN: It seems that people are used to getting distorted information...

KS: In a certain way, yes. I think this can mainly be attributed to the fact that whatever is written becomes true, and people tend to believe whatever is written. I just want to provide a forum for people who want to speak up.

AAN: It seems that we are living in a strange time: never has the access to information been so great and the sources so diverse, but a lot of people just seem to be getting and relying in 'distorted' information. Do you agree?

KS: We just need to consider our domestic television networks (in the US), which provide very little information on foreign countries, on their view and response regarding the status of America in the world today. One needs to rely on the European and Asian channels to get a better awareness of what is going on in the world. As an artist, there is always a dilemma: should an artist take action following certain political decisions or should an artist stay away from politics? In my case, I want to open the floor for people to discuss and exchange ideas. In a way, I am a witness and I am not making any direct comments or statements. I do not see my role as to judge people, but rather as to raise awareness about certain topics. The response will be in the hands of each individual.

AAN: Do you feel that today artist have the power to set things in motion?

KS: Yes and no. Yes, artists could set things in motion, and can be very 'loud', but artists do not have enough power to persuade people to change the world. However, we are responsible for our own example and how we perform them. It is not necessary to make political statements, for example, but we can make a statement in a beautiful, peaceful, and spiritual way. In my opinion, artists can do something to resolve certain problems, but it is not easy, and it tends to remain a modest attempt of a very different scale than the head of a political section. Within a few seconds, they can give instructions to empower certain people, yet take it away from others. As modest as our attempt may be, I think it is important to bring attention to the suffering and death caused by unconditional unfairness. We cannot just neglect that.

AAN: Nam June Paik passed away at the beginning of this year. Do you feel that in terms of contemporary art, he has left a legacy behind in Korea?

KS: Absolutely. Before the 1988 Olympic Games in Seoul, he had no presence in Korea, nobody knew him except for some art insiders, and none of his works were shown. Although since 1988 things have changed dramatically, and Nam June Paik has been widely seen in Korea, still I do not think he received enough recognition or support from the Korean government. Throughout his career, he did a lot for Korea, and for the Korean people. He was very influential on Korean artists, and he contributed to creating a good image of Korea. He should have been more appreciated and supported by Korea, the Korean people, and by Korean museums. However, I am glad that ultimately the county where Nam June Paik was born has decided to build a museum dedicated to his work. The county has been acquiring hundreds of his pieces, and I consider it a great gesture — all the more so as it is based on the initiative of a provincial political officer and not a museum. This is very encouraging, as the museum will permanently be dedicated to Nam June Paik.

AAN: Has Nam June Paik changed the attitude of museums in Korea, encouraging them to collect the work of contemporary Korean artist like you, who are mainly working in video and performance?

KS: Presently, only one of my pieces is in a Korean museum: A Needle Woman, which belongs to the Samsung Museum. This specific piece caused many difficulties when the museum decided to acquire it, as my video piece was purchased by the museum, the Korean government charged considerable tax on it because it was considered a commercial movie. Consequently, the Samsung Museum and the Korean tax customs were in a lawsuit for many years. Korean law makes no differentiation between contemporary art works like my video pieces and a mass production commercial movie. Ironically, the tax authorities believed my video work was similar to Nam June Paik's work, which is considered the father of video art. The museum finally won the lawsuit last year, but it took over five years to settle the dispute. My case set a precedent, and today, artists can sell their video pieces without paying these enormous taxes. So far, A Needle Woman remains the only piece from my work in a museum collection in Korea.

AAN: What is the reason for your 'under representation' in museum collections in Korea?

KS: It is difficult to say. Perhaps it has a lot to do with the way the system (the galleries, the museums etc.) work, or perhaps they simply do not like my work.

AAN: Is your work widely represented in American museums?

KS: My work is represented in some American museums (P.S.1, some West Coast museums, etc.), but most of my projects are actually taking place in Europe.

AAN: Do you think your work is 'too different' for an American audience?

KS: I think the perception on art is very different in America and in Europe. If we take a closer look at the gallery scene in New York, most of the shows taking place in Chelsea are based on 'products' and people buy these 'products' rather than artworks that inspire them. I think the materialistic perception and the environment in the US clearly influence the collectors and their taste. There are always some exceptions, but I personally tend to find European audiences more sensitive, often more knowledgeable, and perceptive.

AAN: You presently have a show in Madrid that runs until July. Can you describe the piece?

KS: The exhibition is at the Crystal Palace, which is run by Reina Sofía. It is a beautiful glass pavilion, and I decided to create one large single installation. I covered the whole glass pavilion with a diffraction grid film, which creates a rainbow like effect all over the surface. The effect varies quite dramatically over the glass depending on the light source, the direction of the light, and its sharpness. In addition, there is a mirror structure over the floor, which reflects the entire structure of the building below the feet of the audience. I also installed the Weaving Factory, which I previously showed in Venice.

AAN: How would you say your work has evolved since your residency at P.S.1 in New York?

KS: For me, P.S.1 was one of the most influential experiences: it opened my career to the international art world. It led me to create my Bottari piece, and I started to do more installations based on my work from P.S.1. When I went back after a stay abroad, I became aware of the cultural conflicts within Korean society because by that time, I had the experience that things could be different. I had even more difficulties after coming back following a one year and a half stay in New York. I had to struggle because I had different perspectives, while the society was still very closed, stressful, and not supportive. I decided to leave the country to settle in New York, which was difficult, but at the same time very challenging. Putting myself on the edge of my life was a great challenge, and in retrospect, I think it made my professional practice even more focused, and more in depth. Since then, everything has been positive with museum shows around the world, participation in the most prestigious international shows and biennales, and good reviews.

AAN: Has religion, Buddhism, had an impact on your projects?

KS: I am not a practicing Buddhist, but I am very interested in Buddhism. It is very similar to the way I am thinking and to the way I perceive life, death, and daily life. I believe it carries great truth, but I do not want to represent any specific religious belief. I want to go beyond that, and embrace everyone's beliefs.

AAN: Which projects are closest to your heart?

KS: The sewing piece, the Bottari piece, and, of course, A Needle Woman. The Lighthouse Woman was also one of my favorite projects, in part because it was temporary and site specific with a very special environment and collaboration. I am strongly drawn to the idea of completing additional site specific and temporary installations, especially in Europe, where there are numerous very interesting sites.

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