



To Breathe – Invisible Needle, Invisible Mirror. Teatro La Fenice, Venice, 2006

To Breathe / Respirar

Angela Vettese, 2006

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In her 2006 New Year's wishes to her friends, Kimsooja included a short and true story about a pair of twin girls who were born prematurely. One of the twins was not expected to live. A nurse from the hospital decided to break the rules and placed the two infants in the same incubator. Once the newborns were placed together, side by side, they embraced each other. The stronger of the two helped to regulate the body temperature and heartbeat of the weaker one, thus enabling the weaker one to survive against all expectations. Nothing could introduce this book, the second collaborative effort between La Fenice Theatre and the Bevilacqua La Masa Foundation, more poetically than the story of this metaphoric event. For the duration of one month, and preceding each opera performance at the Teatro La Fenice, the public will have the opportunity to view Kimsooja's latest video work projected on the theater's screen. The Bevilacqua La Masa Foundation is proud to be the first Italian art center to have established an agreement of this kind with an opera house. Upon viewing Kimsooja's videos, both at La Fenice and at the gallery space of the Foundation, but in particular the one selected for the theater, it seems only fitting to ask ourselves what the contents and significance of such videos are. Indeed, here is one of those rare occasions that demonstrate how the methods of interpreting contemporary art are not so dissimilar from those used for interpreting opera: the initial and instinctive pleasure one receives is deepened and made more complete only upon having learned something about the musical score and the operatic libretto. It is only after a first reading that one is then ready for a second, more competent and knowledgeable understanding.

The title of the video chosen for the occasion is *To Breathe / Respirar*. It is a succession of colors that anticipate the rhythm of breathing—at times hurried, at times calm and composed. The video does not portray any images, rather only colors, and speaks of the need for air, emptiness, and space for filling our lungs. Breathing is an act of survival as well as a therapeutic response to the small and large troubles that life imposes on us. Breathing as an essential act explains why the video is an image reduced to its basic essence, that is, to light.

Although indebted to Mondrian from an artistic and theoretical point of view, as Kimsooja confirms herself, the artist does not betray her first and foremost tradition which stems from a deep relationship to Korean life and aesthetics. In this way *To Breathe / Respirar* leads us to look for its origins in the artist's previous works. In the 1980s Kimsooja used the fabrics and clothes that had belonged to her grandmother as a source for her geometric patchworks, which were often made in the form of a cross as in *The Earth and the Heaven* (1984). To the detriment of its geometry, the fortuitousness of the composition as then intensified in such later works as *Toward the Mother Earth* (1990-91) and *The Mind and the World* (1991): pieces of material arranged like rapid brush strokes, but also like fragments of life, collected from the street and somehow brought back to life. Also the series 'Deductive Objects', created in the early 1990s, included strips of material compiled in this same way, even if scattered on the floor in a multi-colored trail or hung like tablecloths over tiny bar tables.

Many of the artist's subsequent works show concepts similar to the one presented in the video at La Fenice, where the idea of pieces of fabric, or rags, has been substituted by the valuable cloth that in Korea is given to newly wed couples as a nuptial bed covering. We are speaking of *Bottari*, which Kimsooja has used in numerous and varied ways. On different occasions they have been displayed like ordinary clothes, or as extremely decorative and interrelated layers of colors (e.g., *Bottari*, 2000; *A Laundry Woman*, 2000; *A Mirror Woman*, 2002). In the early 1990s Kimsooja presented the *Bottari* in another form, that of a traveling bundle: a swollen fruit containing just a few of one's possessions. In the performance presented at the exhibition "Cities on the Move", Kimsooja traveled by truck for eleven days in November of 1997 through all the Korean towns and cities that had been fundamental to the formation of her own identity. She was aware that she would soon be leaving behind Korea — and her fond attachment to it — to live and work in Europe and the United States. The images produced in this performance show her standing upright, with her back against the truck cab, and supported by the mound of *Bottari* that also served as a psychological reminder of her burden.

The *Bottari* as a sign of bound identity, as a way to be seen but also as a way to not see, became a cascade of color that draped and spilled forth from the body of the artist in the performance *Encounter: Looking into Sewing* *A Needle Woman* (1999-2005). Here her body is presented as a needle which, although immobile and harnessing the flow of people around her, penetrates the crowd and knits the people together. In metaphorical terms, the combining of colors and pieces of cloth is no different than the "gathering" or "garnering" of people.

Breathing is a symmetrical act, and thus it is akin to a given aesthetic found in the majority of Kimsooja's works — both those where her own body is at play and those where objects are the central focus. Take for example the installation *Lotus: Zone of Zero* (2003) erected in the center of the nearly monumental greenhouse of Lille. The installation consisted of 307 lanterns in the form of lotuses, from which issued the sounds of three cultural sources: an interweaving of Tibetan, Gregorian, and Islamic chants, presented always in the spirit of sewing and binding. The symmetry also becomes a way for emphasizing the relationships therein: right / left, above / below, inner / outer. It is no coincidence that in the version of *A Mirror Woman* presented at the Honolulu City Hall (*A Mirror Woman - the ground of nowhere*, 2003), hands, emotions and friendships were sewn together in a completely symmetrical tower of gauze. Here visitors were invited to lie down on a circular mirror placed on the floor, one that reflected a portion of open sky exposed by another circle located above the tall cone of gauze. The position that Kimsooja assumes in

almost all of her performances is one of symmetry, including her solitary meditation along the sacred Yamuna River, as well as her immersion in the chaos of Times Square on March 11, 2005 (A Beggar Woman). The emotional shock produced which in the first case can be seen simply by the artist's exposure to nature and to her own intimate and internal thoughts — is also felt in A Beggar Woman by all those people who notice her sitting on the ground, immobile as a lotus, like some unexpected flower that has suddenly sprung forth. Even in those images where symmetry is absent, such as in the portion of A Needle Woman in which the artist leans against a rock, or in the disjointed movements of A Wind Woman (2005), the lack of harmony is reasserted along with a desire to regain it. This also happens in the repetitive and circular passage of day into night, a cycle characterized by a conciliatory symmetry that the artist has marked out in more than one of her videos.

The video To Breathe / Respirar is an extreme and mature synthesis of all the themes presented in Kimsooja's works. Nothing is more symmetrical than the monochrome. These monochromes are sewn together by that electronic needle called post-production. The color and form are similar to a kind of Asian silk, but also to Western modernism: in this way, one inhales and exhales, duality harmonizes, distant cultural traditions unite and connect like mirrored images, or like two twins helping each other to live.

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