



A Needle Woman – Kitakyushu, 1999, Single channel video projection, 6:33 loop, silent, Commissioned by CCA Kitakyushu

## A Disappearing Woman

Rosa Martinez, 2012

During the twentieth century the desire to build bridges of spiritual intelligence between East and West has helped balance the excesses of the rationalist mind while it has eased the suffering imposed on the planet in the name of progress. The growing popularisation of Buddhist philosophy, the critical questioning of counterculture and non-violent dissidence and the continuous diaspora of Asian artists have resulted in new perspectives that extend and illuminate the global horizon.

In this landscape of exchanges, *The Secret of the Golden Flower*, a Taoist text written almost two thousand years ago, arrived in the West thanks to psychologist Carl Gustav Jung and sinologist Richard Wilhelm, who published the first English version in 1931. Jung and Wilhelm suggested the interconnection between gnosis (as a hermetic tradition of the profound knowledge of the Self), methods of physical and emotional healing such as yoga, and processes in the collective unconscious understood as a psychic substratum common to mankind as a whole. *The Secret of the Golden Flower* is also an alchemical treatise on inner transformation, which is something pursued by the masters of all mystical traditions. 'The Golden Flower is the Light, and the Light of Heaven is the Tao.' [1]

In another book, *Invisible Cities*, by Italo Calvino, we learn of the adventures of the legendary Venetian traveller Marco Polo, who arrived at the Mongolian court of Kublai Kahn in the thirteenth century. Remaining at the court as an ambassador for seventeen years, the story reveals how he entertained the Kahn with the tales of the cities he had visited during his travels, many of them imaginary. The book ends with an instructive reflection: 'The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by living together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The

second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno and make them endure, give them space.' [2]

The work by Kimsooja is inscribed in this very context of learning and wisdom, as for over three decades her proposals have sought new forms of connection between East and West and have created spaces of beauty, healing and awakening. On her travels as an international artist Kimsooja has visited the most varied places, carrying out performances, making documentary films, holding exhibitions of her works and producing site-specific interventions. Her oeuvre has connected the genealogy of Korean culture to the linguistic systems of global contemporary art in a synthesis that, as José Roca has put it, maintains 'a position of resistance against being digested into an aseptic internationalism,' while it intends, 'in these days of multiculturalism, to hyperbolize the characteristics of its difference to become more "exotic" in a medium eager for otherness.' [3]

Kimsooja has prioritised intuition as a means of knowledge, linking different cultures with threads that can be visible or invisible, always seeking a common anthropological substratum as, from a clearly universalistic vision, she considers that everything about human nature concerns her. 'My philosophical and artistic aim is to achieve the totality which absorbs and unites the whole question of self and the world.' [4]

The cities, paths and landscapes travelled by Kimsooja are neither fantastic nor imaginary. Her metropolises are real, overpopulated, impoverished by war, colonial exploitation or ideological embargoes. The streets she chooses are paths travelled by beings that survive within the limits determined by their geopolitical position. She also chooses ancient places or contexts in which the primeval forces of nature unfold. Very often her firm slender body appears amidst the crowds or on the silhouette of a rock, either standing up or lying down, but always motionless and with her back to the spectator. This generic and at once recognisable body, the lank hair tied back, remains static and contemplative, allowing the world—be it India's River Yamuna or Cairo's human sea—to flow before or around her. 'For me the most important thing to arise out of these performances is my own experience of self and awareness as a process rather than the video as a result. That's how I continue to ask questions to the world and to myself.' [5]

These works have the intensity of a hypnotic trance. They manage to draw spectators out of their mental dispersion, making them momentarily identify with the artist's own experience. Their titles are apposite for focusing on her philosophical and archetypal concerns. *The Earth and the Heaven* (1984), *Toward the Mother Earth* (1990-1991) and *The Mind and the World* (1991) speak of cosmological connections. *A Needle Woman* (1999-2009), *A Beggar Woman* (2000-2001), *A Laundry Woman* (2000), *A Mirror Woman* (2002) and *A Wind Woman* (2003) allude to woman's role as healer and mediator. *To Breathe/Respirar* (2006) addresses key emotions through breathing and the diffraction of light, while *Earth-Water-Fire-Air* (2009-2010) returns to the contemplation of the fundamental elements of nature.

In formal terms, Kimsooja's evolution reveals how she was surrounded by, and yet remained independent from, the dominant forces in Korea from the late seventies to the nineties, i.e., monochrome painting and the Minjung movement, turning instead to two-dimensional sewn works in the eighties and sculptural objects, Bottari installations and time-based performances and videos in the nineties. Her iconic Bottari, her mysterious 'deductive' objects and her installations evince how her mature artistic language falls into the field of expanded sculpture. Since Joseph Beuys said that even a thought can be considered sculpture insofar as it plastically shapes the spectator's mind, and Piero Manzoni converted the world into a giant ready-made when he built his *Socle du Monde* (1961), artists have explored, reconstructed or reinvented reality starting from its fundamental materials: people, nature, desire and destruction.

Kimsooja fixes her gaze on the world and intervenes in it, always in an extremely delicate way for, juxtaposing terminology, she considers what exists more a 'ready-used' than a 'ready-made'. She used clothes belonging to her grandmother for the very first time in 1983, and since then traditional Korean clothes and bedcovers have been a means of recycling 'our body and life itself.' [6]

Whether they compose Bottari or unfold in space, these used Korean bedcovers, as canvases and as frames of our life, have appeared as a constant feature in her work, just as her own body has been a performative

sculpture, a symbolic needle that abandons the place once its healing mediation is over. 'Sewing and wrapping clothes have always been processes shred with contemplation and healing,' says the artist, adding, 'The relationship of the needle to the fabric is same as my body to the universe.' [7]

As well as having close ties with the Korean female domestic roles, Kimsooja's work bears similarities with the visions of other artists such as Louise Bourgeois, who has also considered the ambivalent power of the needle and its ability to heal. When Kimsooja stands with her back to the camera, her work can be visually associated with that by Caspar David Friedrich, and yet she establishes a conceptual difference: for while the character depicted by Friedrich is immersed in cosmic solitude, her gaze offers us a non-tragic proximity in which stillness is a form of knowledge. Her continuous search for sacred geometry connects the horizontal with the vertical—the earth, the sky, and the human being, the same three basic elements of Taoism—and with yin and yang as energies that structure the world, all of which bears similarities with the theosophical and abstract research by painters such as Piet Mondrian.

Among the works on display in this exhibition are a few essential pieces in her creative itinerary that had not hitherto been shown in Korea. In *Bottari: Alfa Beach*(2001) the inverted arrangement of the horizon between the sea and the sky visualises the artist's consciousness and feelings: 'The inversion happened when I saw the horizon from the Alfa Beach in Nigeria where African slaves were sent to Atlantic ocean—this was the saddest line I've ever seen in my life, thinking of the destiny of the slaves and their deprived freedom. Thus the flipped horizon was, for me, a disturbed horizon, a disorientated sense of gravity and of the slaves' psychological return I perceived in the curls of the waves reaching the same shore from which they had left.' [8]

In the trilogy *Mirror of Water, Mirror of Air, Mirror of Wind*(2010), filmed in Greenland, the texture of the natural elements takes the viewer back to the idea of a pictorial surface that connects so many of her works. *A Needle Woman* is no doubt one of her masterpieces and a significant icon in the history of contemporary art. In the first edition of the piece (1999-2001) the artist stood with her back to the crowds of Tokyo, Shanghai, Mexico City, London, Delhi, New York, Cairo and Lagos. In the edition made especially for her participation in the Venice Biennale of 2005 she travelled to the cities of Patan, Jerusalem, Sana'a, Havana, Rio de Janeiro and N'Djamena, appearing again as a cosmic needle sewing human tissue to space and timelessness. In *A Wind Woman* (2003) the fleeting landscapes filmed at high speed by her camera look as if they had been painted by brushstrokes of wind and threads of time in order to extend interstitial spaces. They also betray traces of different pictorial styles such as Impressionism, Expressionism and even Minimalism, as when the landscape is completely dark, light or pervaded by a bright blue sky. In *An Album: Havana* (2007), a sequence filming the parallel lines of the *malecón* and the seafront horizon, people and landscape gradually merge to create an abstract, dynamic and yet ethereal composition that ends up dissolving into the light and wind. In these works the artist's body appears elliptical, outside of the screen's field of vision, just as it is in *To Breathe – Invisible Needle/Invisible Mirror*, a projection of saturated monochrome colours, the changing spectrum of which is synchronised with the sound of the artist's peaceful or strained breathing and with meditative humming. Presented at La Fenice theatre in Venice, it is a return to the issue of canvas and asks 'Where is surface?', along the lines of Minimalist abstraction. 'When the digital colour spectrum is constantly changing, we don't grasp the reality of surface,' [9] says the artist. At the same time, the signs and iconographic motifs of Korean bedcovers and clothes dematerialise as forms and colours dissolve into pure light and breathing sound. The audience breathes visually, in harmony with the artist's sound performance.

Verging on the ethnographic documentary and yet preserving the spatial format of a four-screen video installation, *Mumbai: A Laundry Field* (2008) is a visual stroll through overpopulated Mumbai. The camera shows the arduous work of washing laundry: it travels along the narrow streets of the slums, captures dwellings filled with rubble in which people sleep on tarmac and draws up close to the overcrowded trains on an ongoing and oppressive circuit: 'This piece juxtaposes rich visual experience with extremely tough living conditions for mankind. It follows the aesthetics of fabrics as transformed canvases and, at the same time, reveals the harsh reality of daily life in slum areas of Mumbai. ... For me it is a retrospective version of older works for it has the dimensions of the fabrics I used to make, both visually and symbolically; clothes and fabrics stand here for human presences and the questions that concern us all.' [10] *Thread Routes. Chapter 1. Peru* (2010) is the first 16mm film in an ongoing series in which the artist captures the material and immaterial threads woven by

different cultures. *Chapter 1: Peru* begins with a panorama that covers the mountain peaks of the Andes. In the middle of a circular amphitheatre a standing woman turns a spindle. A long downward travelling shot reveals a landscape of farmed fields that resemble woven earth, as do the lines of sedimented sand under the water of a lake, women's plaits and the threads of wool in a loom. In this work the artist uses reiteration as a rhetorical figure, insisting on the slowness of the gaze and committing herself to lengthy descriptions that highlight the poetry of Peruvian thread works and the pictorial juxtaposition of the elements she interconnects. Her intention is for the gaze 'to link weaving and knitting activities to geometrical, agricultural and architectural forms, to the fabric of landscapes and to meditative repetitive actions and festivities that reveal their primeval truth and aesthetics.' [11]

Art and artists are proven to have a key function—to offer relevant interpretations of the time and place in which they emerge, to shape a path that will penetrate mirages and draw us towards the profound essence of reality. Relevant artists like as Kimsooja act as bridges, mediators, channels that offer the truth of their visions, arresting noise and clearing confusion. Like all other human beings, artists experience thousands of phenomena along their existential paths, but through creative practice they are gradually able to purify them. Kimsooja's oeuvre is characterised by a firm will to reach the deepest spheres of awareness by means of the most accurate of artistic procedures. She does so through works that transport memories, emotions, distances and universal realities; proposals for connecting heaven and earth; gestures that require coming together, alms or silence. The artist has even declared that one of her wishes is to disappear, to become invisible: 'I want to disappear at some point with my own decision, and I've been planning "A Disappearing Woman" piece ...'. [12] This disappearance has to do with both her own need to become increasingly slight and subtle after having travelled the world burdened by the memories of so many people, and with her reflections on her own ontological question.

The epitaph the Greek poet Nikos Kazantzakis chose for his tombstone, 'I hope nothing. I fear nothing. I am free,' coincides with the Buddhist teachings of Crazy Wisdom, that declares that this spiritual practice is related to 'all that is free of hope and fear.' [13] Indeed, losing one's fear of not having is to have, and losing one's fear of disappearing is to remain.

In her oeuvre Kimsooja wishes to find new ways of perception in 'doing' by 'non-doing', for 'doing nothing' may reveal something meaningful as 'the moment of awareness or a moment of light that results from artistic practice itself.' [14] Thanks to this wise balance we may discover a third eye with which to contemplate the true foundations of art and life without fearing we shall dissolve or disappear, as we shall go back to being air, water, earth and fire, fully aware that every practice conveys a possibility of light and every death implies a new rebirth.

1. Carl Gustav Jung and Richard Wilhelm, *The Secret of the Golden Flower. A Chinese Book of Life*, Routledge, London, 1999 (p. 21). First published in 1931 by Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., London.
2. Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, Division of Educational Studies, Emory University, Georgia.
3. José Roca, 'Kimsooja: A Mirror Woman,' Peter Blum Gallery, New York, 2002.
4. Gerald Matt, 'Kim Sooja im Gespräch mit Gerald Matt', in *Kim Sooja: A Laundry Woman* (exh. cat.), Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna, 2002.
5. Mary Jane Jacob, 'Interview with Kimsooja' in Jacquelynn Baas and Mary Jane Jacob (Eds.), *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 2003.
6. Gerald Matt, 'Kim Sooja im Gespräch mit Gerald Matt', op. cit., 2002.
7. Mary Jane Jacob, 'In the Space of Art: Buddha and the Culture of Now,' op. cit., 2003.
8. Kimsooja in conversation with Rosa Martinez, 2012.
9. Idem.
10. Idem.
11. Idem.