



A Mirror Woman: The Sun & the Moon, 2008, 4 channel video projection, sound, 12:33 loop

Kimsooja: Black Holes, Meditative Vanishings and Nature as a Mirror of the Universe

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One of the best-known works by the Korean artist, Kimsooja (b. Taegu, 1957, lives and works in New York, Seoul and Paris) is the video and performance *Cities on the Move: 2727 kilometres Bottari Truck* (1997), created for the much-discussed exhibition, *Cities on the Move*. [1] It is a quiet version of a road movie. We see a blue truck, loaded with colourful bundles of textiles, called *bottari* in Korean, piled up on one another like a mountain. Kimsooja is sitting at the top of the pile and makes the journey together with the truck, 2727 kilometres along all the places she had lived as a child. The frame of the image is fixed: from the back, we see Kimsooja as an anonymous female figure in the lotus position, while cities and Korean mountain landscapes move past. For *Cities on the Move* (1997), curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist and Hou Hanru, artists, architects and designers investigated or reflected on urban transformations in Asia as a result of globalization and modernization. Because of the associations that the work evokes with the concepts of migration and nomadic lifestyles, Kimsooja's *2727 kilometres Bottari Truck* became the ultimate metaphor for this theme. Her participation in the exhibition marked her definitive breakthrough into the international exhibition circuit. [2] Commenting on the great interest being shown in her work, she has said, '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. (...) The issues that 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 works. This may be one reason for their success.' [3]

In this context, Kimsooja also expressed her criticism of the international biennial circuit, which she finds 'more and more focused on the power structure within the art world'. [4] Although Kimsooja's work, as she herself indicates, indisputably concerns the field of tension between the rise of a global culture and regional values and such themes as migration and cultural conflict, at the same time, it goes much further. Equally fascinating

in her work is her utterly personal approach to performance and the representation of nature, both of which are strongly influenced by an Eastern way of looking at things.

A Needle Woman (1999-2001) is a multichannel video installation in which Kimsooja forms the unmoving, meditative central point. Her face turned away from the viewer, she stands in the middle of the masses of people in different urban metropolises: Tokyo, Shanghai, Mexico City, London, Delhi, New York, Cairo and Lagos. The title, *A Needle Woman*, describes how Kimsooja sees herself: as a needle that 'pricks through' the social, societal context of the different geographic locations. It is a handsome example of the way in which her work embraces a marriage between the characteristically Western model of participation in relational aesthetics and Eastern, meditative techniques. [5] While her work shares roots with the relational aesthetics of such artists as Maurizio Cattelan, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Pierre Huyghe and Rirkrit Tiravanija, it begins with a concept of space and time that contradicts that approach. Where, in the work of an artist such as Rirkrit Tiravanija, the encounter with the public is the central focus, as a temporary social activity, Kimsooja's performances separate themselves from this temporary character and have the objective of creating a moment of concentration and focus that is binding, revealing and in essence holistic. 'I am interested in approaching the reality that embraces everything, because it is the only way to get to the point without manipulation.' [6]

In the Korean art scene in which Kimsooja first defined her position as an artist in the early 1980s, there was an ongoing debate about cultural identity, a critical review of formalism and the meaning of social engagement, similar to that of the art world in the West. The need to mix art with life went hand-in-hand with attention to local, cultural traditions and the reflection on the history of one's home country. Kimsooja belongs to a new generation of artists who are interested in the body, memory, intimacy, the everyday and the marginal. She found her identity as an artist at the point when she decided to abandon paints and canvas, the media canonized by the history of Western art that she had mastered as a student at the Hong-Ik University in Seoul. Like Tiravanija, Kimsooja chose to use everyday materials and activities as her starting point. The *ybulbo*, a traditional piece of cloth in cotton or silk, printed with colourful motifs and which has since time immemorial had a range of everyday functions in Korea - people sleep and children are born on them and they serve to wrap up items for safekeeping or for travel - became her new 'canvas', needle and thread her 'brushes'. In the 1980s, Kimsooja stitched these traditional cloths together into covers and objects, bundled them into *bottari* and used them in countless installations and performances. From here, she gradually developed a working method in which she saw her own body as the needle or thread and the world as 'the canvas'. Her performances were recorded with video cameras as a condensed moment of energy and interaction with the world, whereby the screen functions as a metaphor of the screen that exists between Kimsooja and the rest of the world.

Kimsooja came from a Catholic family, but daily life in Korea is also permeated with both Confucianism and a mix of Buddhism and shamanism. After Buddhism, Christianity, both Protestant and Catholic, is the primary religion in South Korea. Korean religion is complex and eclectic in nature: it is founded in old Confucian, Buddhist and Taoist traditions but it also embraces many Christian elements. The fact that her work reveals so much in common with the principles of Zen Buddhism was something she only realized rather late in her career. Still, she does not want to refer to her work as either Eastern or Western. It is a way of thinking that confuses Western art critics. In an interview, Nicolas Bourriaud asked her, 'Do you think that oriental thought has a real impact on the contemporary art world, or is it only a postmodern kind of exoticism, a decor for western aesthetic investigations?' Kimsooja's reply was that the Eastern way of thinking inhabits every context of contemporary art history, not just as theory, but as an attitude melded into one's personality and existence, and is inseparable from Western thinking. [7]

Kimsooja's interventions in public space are not about an open, noncommittal social relationship. Her meditative 'disappearances' clearly make a moral appeal to the public. For her performances, *A Homeless Woman - Delhi* (2000) and *A Homeless Woman - Cairo* (2001), she set herself down on the ground in the middle of the busy, urban public spaces of Delhi and Cairo, respectively. For a new edition of the video installation of *A Needle Woman* (2005), she visited six cities in precarious political and social circumstances: Patan (Nepal), Jerusalem (Israel), Sana'a (Yemen), Havana (Cuba), Rio de Janeiro (Brazil) and N'Djamena

(Chad). Her unmoving, meditative stillness creates an emptiness and a focus of concentration that makes everything happening around her in all these different metropolises all the more visible. 'I have an ambition as an artist: it is to consume myself to the limit where I will be extinguished. From that moment, I won't need to be an artist anymore, but just a self-sufficient being, or a nothingness that is free from desire.' [8] Kimsooja feels that the highest ideal that can be achieved by an artist is to be as minimal, as unprepossessing a presence as possible.

In her recent multichannel video installation, *A Mirror Woman: The Sun & The Moon* (2008), included in the *Windflower* exhibition, this principle reaches an apex. In this work, the images for which were taken along the beach in Goa, India, we see an exceptional eclipse in which the sun and the moon melt together. To the left and right of this are two additional video screens showing the waves washing up on the beach and the rhythm of the tides. Kimsooja herself is no longer in the image. We can only perceive her indirectly as the person who observes the natural phenomena from behind the camera, and who by way of a technical procedure, records the sun rise and set over the moon. When I asked her if she felt that she had taken an important step towards completely disappearing out of her own work, she replied, 'I personified the mirror symbolically as my body, as an inserted action/performance in between the sun and the moon, so that my presence becomes invisible, and my body/life vanishes while it transforms as a metaphor of an object. (...) When I disappear, I represent the act of nature more closely. Thus only my gaze becomes active.' [9]

Late last year, and from a comparable perspective, Kimsooja created the large-scale video installation, *Earth-Water-Fire-Air* (2009-2010), a temporary project on location on the grounds of one of the largest nuclear reactors in the province of Yonggwang, South Korea. This scale and setting of this version of the video installation was the result of a collaboration between the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Korea, the Korean Ministry of Culture and the company Korea Hydro & Nuclear Power, including Hanjin Shipping. [10] Kimsooja placed a video installation, comprised of eight large screens, each about 150 metres away from the others, on a 1200-metre long pier in the sea. Video recordings that she had taken on the island of Lanzarote in the Canary Islands and of volcanoes in Guatemala formed the cornerstone for an abstract, visual interpretation of nirvana, in which the four elements – earth, water, fire and air – flow into one another. The fact that the character of each element is inseparably bound to the other elements is also expressed in the titles of the six videos: *Fire of Earth, Water of Earth, Earth of Water, Air of Fire, Air of Earth, Air of Water, Fire of Water, Water of Fire*. For a period of two weeks, the video works could be seen after sunset, in the evenings and at night, with visitors having to submit to the strict security regulations of the industrial power complex. With this work, Kimsooja wanted to draw attention to the issue of nuclear energy as a form of energy that, like the concepts of Yin and Yang [two opposite and complementary values in Chinese philosophy-Taoism with which the universe presents itself –ed.], produces positive as well as destructive energy. The work is intended as a contemplation on the use of natural sources of energy and the relationship between mankind, his origins and the earth. In light of the recent catastrophic events at the Fukushima nuclear plant in Japan following the earthquake and tsunami, this work has unexpectedly become all the more poignant and topical.

In an earlier work, the performance and video, *A Needle Woman - Kitakyushu* (1999), Kimsooja lies on a rock formation in the Japanese city of Kitakyushu. It is an extremely minimalist image: heaven and earth and a woman lying on top of a rock formation, forming the line that divides the two. Kitakyushu is an industrial city in western Japan, with a million inhabitants. In the 1960s, the city had a bad reputation because of air pollution, but today, the recycling and water purification techniques that are employed there are now being adopted as a model for other major Japanese cities. It is a strange anachronism that in the video, Kitakyushu is only represented in an image of the nature present in the tattered margins of the city. The earth and the air, however, appear as universal eminences, as Yin and Yang, the dynamic powers from the natural world, as we know them from classic Chinese science and philosophy. As Kimsooja explains, 'When I was invited to make a new commissioned work at the Centre for Contemporary Art in Kitakyushu, Japan, I thought I would do a performance piece – one in the city of Tokyo, and the other one in nature. Then I would juxtapose them together. This was to examine how my body reacts and defines, in relationship to the given environmental conditions that are the human being and nature. As a result, one was standing still in the middle of a crowd, while the other was lying down on a rock, facing nature. Verticality and horizontality were a metaphor for a dynamic balance between urban and natural forces.' [11]

In the West, people are sometimes inclined to identify Yin and Yang in terms of opposite ideas of good and bad, but the essence of Taoist philosophy is not to think in terms of the opposites of moral judgments, but from the idea of a balance. It is primarily this spiritual principle that is deeply anchored in Kimsooja's work and is a determining factor for her perspective of nature and landscape – being present, being absent, as actively as possible, so that a black hole is created that attracts all meaning towards itself. As an artist, one becomes a mirror of the complexity of the universe, facing the viewer. In this, Kimsooja is a master.

Notes:

1. *Cities on the Move*, travelling exhibition (1997-1999), successively in Vienna; CACP Bordeaux; PS1 New York; Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebaek Denmark; Hayward Gallery London; Bangkok (various locations across the city); Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki.
2. Kimsooja took part in the first edition of the Kwangju Biennial (1995) and Manifesta (1996), as well as Istanbul Biennial (1997), São Paulo Biennial (1998), the Venice Biennial (1999, 2001, 2005, 2007), Tapei Biennial (2000), Busan Biennial (2002), Whitney Biennial (2002), Yokoyama Triennial (2005) and recently, the Thessaloniki Biennial (2009) and the Moscow Biennial (2009).
3. Olivia Sand, 'An interview with Kimsooja', *Asian Art Newspaper*, May 2006.
4. 'Although I've been in many of these international events, and have had both positive and negative experiences, in general the international Biennials scene shows very little respect for art and artists. They seem to focus more and more on the power structure of the art world, and their specific political alliances with the artists and institutions, rather than the quality of the work and its meaning,' in Petra Kaps, 'Kimsooja – A One-Word Name is An Anarchist's Name', interview, 2006, published on Kimsooja's website: www.kimsooja.com.
5. The concept of 'relational aesthetics' was coined by the French curator and theorist, Nicolas Bourriaud. In the late 1990s, he used this term to try to categorize a certain type of art and artists, 'a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space'. The term was first used in the catalogue for the exhibition, *Traffic*, at the CACP in Bordeaux, which was curated by Bourriaud and included such artists as Maurizio Cattelan, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Liam Gillick, Carsten Holler, Pierre Huyghe, Philippe Parreno, Jorg Pardo and Rirkrit Tiravanija. They have historically become model examples of relational aesthetics. See also, Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Dijon, Les presses du réel, 2002.
6. From an interview with Nicolas Bourriaud in *Kimsooja: Conditions of Humanity*, exhibition catalogue, Contemporary Art Museum, Lyon, 2003. The quote continues: 'Most people approach reality from analysis or "from language to colligation" which is the "truth", but I am proposing a "colligation to be analyzed" by audiences.'
7. Ibid. Kimsooja's response was, 'It would be unfortunate if the Western art world considered Eastern thought as a decor for Western aesthetic investigation – as if it were another element to add without noticing the fact that it is a way – in the process of making art. It is always there, as a dialectic, in all basic phenomena of art and life together. Eastern thought often functions in a passive and reserved way of expression, usually invisible, nonverbal, indirect, disguised, and immaterial. Western thought functions more with identity, controversy, gravity, construction in general, rather than deconstruction, and material rather than immaterial, compared to Eastern thought. The process finally becomes the awareness and necessity of the presence of both in contemporary art. It is the Yin and Yang, a co-existence that endlessly transforms and enriches.'
8. Olivia Maria Rubio, 'An interview with Kimsooja', *Art and Context*, summer 2006.
9. Interview with the artist by the author, November 2010.
10. The piece was originally created for and commissioned by the Lanzarote Biennale and Atelier Hermes in Seoul.
11. Op. cit, note 9.