

# Kimsooja: Contemplating the Human Condition

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## Abstract:

Kimsooja is a contemporary Korean Conceptual artist whose interdisciplinary artistic practice brings forward a meditative quality that encourages both the artist and the viewer/participant to move towards an entirely open awareness of the self. Kimsooja's art and approach to life are influenced by Eastern philosophies and belief systems such as Buddhism and Taoism. As such, the presence of her art in the Western world effectively weaves together two different, but not mutually exclusive, cultures and ways of thinking. Temporality, anonymity, and performance are central to many of Kimsooja's works, giving her the ability to transform her personal experiences into neutral, universally accessible artworks that highlight human connection across time, space, and identity.

**Keywords:** Conceptual art, Buddhism, Performance art, Kimsooja, Korean Art, Temporality

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## Introduction

Kimsooja (b. 1957) is a contemporary Korean artist whose meditative artworks explore and address "issues of the displaced self."<sup>1</sup> Fundamentally human, Kimsooja's art is often directly tied to her biography. Even so, she refrains from imposing any strictly personal narratives onto her work. In-

stead, she strives to transform her subjectivity into more broadly relatable and accessible artistic experiences. The word "universal" has gained a negative connotation in post-modern and contemporary settings, however it plays a big role in Kimsooja's practice. Deeply influenced by certain aspects of Buddhist thought and philosophy, "universal" in the context of her work does not denote an essentializing or totalizing of all humanity, rather it rep-

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<sup>1</sup> Deeplai Dewan and Murtaza Vali, *Post Object: Michael Joo, Kimsooja, Samina Mansuir, Pushpamala N., Ravinder Reddy* (Toronto: Doris McCarthy Gallery, 2007), 30.

resents an effort “to cultivate a mindfulness of what human beings encounter by virtue of being human” through art.<sup>2,3</sup> By constantly pondering the reality of the human condition and experience – both spiritually and corporeally – Kimsooja encourages the development of an entirely open and aware consciousness in both herself and the viewer not unlike the Buddhist ambition towards enlightenment.<sup>4</sup> As such, her art has a democratized quality that imbues it with the ability to blur the lines between and unite the individual and the multiple, the body with the spirit, and even possibly the East and the West.<sup>5</sup>

In the following pages, I will analyze a selection of Kimsooja’s artworks in order to explore how their unifying quality functions within a globalized world intertwined with the legacies of colonialism and the construction of orientalism. It will begin with an investigation into the influence of Buddhist thought and philosophy on her work and contemporary art more generally. Following this, the performative videos that make up *Sewing into Walking* (1994) will be discussed for their cyclical and nomadic features which directly reflect Buddhist teachings and the experience of migration. Second, another performative video *Cities on the Move – 2727 Kilometers Bottari Truck, Korea* (1997) and its connection to notions of migration, labour, globalization, and meditation will be examined. Third, the meditative and durational video *A Laundry Woman – Yamuna River, India* (2000) will

be considered in relation to temporality, Zen Buddhism, and concepts of impermanence. Fourth, *A Needle Woman*, a performative video from 2009, and the artist’s use of meditation and her body to weave together different cultures and peoples will be discussed. These artworks each demonstrate a concern with the past, the present, and the future and focus on the ambiguities that exist between the mind, the body, and the spirit. This brings forward a sense of togetherness amongst the artist and the viewer.<sup>6</sup>

### Buddhism

Buddhism emerged in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE as an alternative religion to Hinduism.<sup>7</sup> The two faiths bare some similarities, most notably the renunciation of the self, but are different in how Buddhism encourages the establishment of a “community of practitioners as a society of equals” and Hinduism does not.<sup>8</sup> Buddhist ways of thought assert that there are three characteristics of existence: impermanence, suffering, and the non-self.<sup>9</sup> Frequently explored in Kimsooja’s videos and installations are the notions of impermanence and the non-self which she expresses through temporality/duration, meditation, and anonymity.

In her book *Makers of Modern Korean Buddhism*, Jin Y. Park introduces and describes Zen Master Daehaeng Sunim’s concept of “Doing Without Doing.” According to Sunim’s teachings, “everything is naturally functioning together with-

<sup>2</sup> Musée d’Art Moderne Saint-Etienne, ed., *Kimsooja* (Milano: Silvana, 2012), 19; and David Morgan, “Kimsooja and the Art of Place,” Kimsooja, 2013, accessed March 21, 2018, [http://www.kimsooja.com/text/morgan\\_12\\_Place.html](http://www.kimsooja.com/text/morgan_12_Place.html), para 6

<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this essay and to eliminate any confusion about the meaning of the word ‘universal,’ please view it in the context of Kimsooja’s work as I have outlined here.

<sup>4</sup> Morgan, “Kimsooja and the Art of Place,” para 3.

<sup>5</sup> Musée d’Art Moderne Saint-Etienne, ed., *Kimsooja*, 17.

<sup>6</sup> Mary Jane Jacob, “Essential Empathy,” Kimsooja, 2013, accessed March 4, 2018, [http://www.kimsooja.com/texts/Jacob\\_13\\_Essential\\_Empathy.html](http://www.kimsooja.com/texts/Jacob_13_Essential_Empathy.html), para 5.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph A. Camilleri, “Citizenship in a Globalizing World,” in *Globalization and Identity: Cultural Diversity, Religion, and Citizenship*, ed. B. Lum (London: Taylor and Francis, 2017), 22.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Jacob, “Essential Empathy,” para 5.

out the mistaken view of a separate doer.”<sup>10</sup> Essentially, the viewpoint states that every living being is connected and is sharing the same body, mind, and life making them inseparable from one another. While Kimsooja is aware of and indicates the indisputability of the tensions that exist between “the rise of global culture and regional values,” she can be seen applying the concept of ‘Doing Without Doing’ to her work as a way to emphasize the connection that human beings share on the basis of being human.<sup>11</sup>

Kimsooja was raised Catholic but grew up in South Korea where Buddhism is the primary religion.<sup>12</sup> Kimsooja, from the very beginning of her life, then, can be said to have been immersed in both Western and Eastern ways of thinking that would have influenced and shaped her day to day life, outlook, and artistic practice. The parallels that exist between the contemporary art world and Buddhism become clear when we take into account the contemporary view of art making as a way of being or becoming or as a path of discovery. Kimsooja’s art can be considered a path of discovery in at least two ways.<sup>13</sup> Since she repeatedly uses meditation in her art, though not necessarily in its conventional form(s), it can be argued that her art is her own personal path to enlightenment. Additionally, by paying almost exclusive attention to the things that define our everyday lives while incorporating the Buddhist influence, Kimsooja creates an instance within which every moment – including the moment a viewer beholds

her work – becomes an opportunity towards enlightenment.<sup>14</sup>

### *Sewing into Walking*

*Sewing into Walking* for instance, is a three-part video that shows Kimsooja performing different actions in three different locations throughout South Korea. The narrative revolves around the *bottari* or bundles of fabric featured in two of the three videos. *Bottari* are traditional Korean bedcovers which have been tied up into bundles that carry household goods when travelling or moving.<sup>15</sup> The videos play on a continuous loop. At the first location of Kyungju, Kimsooja is shown picking up traditional Korean bedcovers and tying them into *bottari*. Then, at Mai Mountain, we watch the artist walk away from the camera alongside a highway. Finally, at Yangdong Village, the artist can be seen placing a *bottari* in the middle of a courtyard and walking away from it.<sup>16</sup> As the landscapes are constantly changing and the *bottari* shift from present to absent to present again, it is the artist’s body that ultimately completes the connection between these videos as it is the most consistent aspect throughout. The overall narrative pertains to the experience of migration and the role *bottari* play in enabling this to happen: first they are put together, second the travelling takes place, and third they are put down at their destination. Kimsooja has been working with *bottari* and what they signify since 1992 and their consistent incorporation into her art has allowed for her to conceptualize the sewing and tying to-

<sup>10</sup> Jin Y. Park, *Makers of Modern Korean Buddhism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 229.

<sup>11</sup> Marente Bloemheugel, Toos van Kooten, Jan van Adrichem, and Kröller-Müller Museum, *Windflower: Perceptions of Nature* (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2011), 102.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 102 and 104.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 104 and Jacob, “Essential Empathy,” para 4.

<sup>14</sup> Morgan, “Kimsooja and the Art of Place,” para 6.

<sup>15</sup> Deeplai Dewana and Murtaza Vali, *Post Object*, 18-19; and Marine Lynne Fleming, Centennial Gallery, and Oakville Galleries, *Soo-Ja Kim: A Laundry Field – Sewing into Walking, Looking into Sewing* (Oakville: Oakville Galleries, 1997), 8.

<sup>16</sup> Deepali Dewan and Murtaza Vali, *Post Object*, 18-19.

gether of fabrics as a way to question and explore “the relation between the “I” and the “Other,”” which speaks to not only the coming together of humanity, but the coming together of artist, artwork, and viewer.<sup>17</sup>

Like the videos in *Sewing into Walking*, the fabrics used to create the *bottari* can also be said to exist in a cyclical way. Kimsooja sources old clothes and bedcovers from friends, family, and strangers for her art. These fabrics “retain the smells of other’s lives, memories, and histories, though their bodies are no longer there...” thereby “creating a network of existences” wherein the fabrics take on new lives in new contexts.<sup>18</sup> Pascale Engelmaier draws our attention to Buddhist doctrine and the “endless cycle of rebirth” that is experienced by all beings in their quest to liberate themselves from feelings of suffering or dissatisfaction.<sup>19</sup> Kimsooja’s cycling of videos and recycling/repurposing of old clothes and bedcovers references this Buddhist conceptualization of an endless cycle of rebirth and speaks to the repetitive nature of reincarnation.

References to human migration are implicit in the *bottari* as they are used when Korean families relocate themselves in some way. Cloth as a material carries with it a history of manufacturing, the gendered division of labour, and the impact of a capitalist world reliant upon globalization. At the same time, though, cloth is infused with the intimacies of everyday life and memories, making it “a quintessential metaphor for the human condition.”<sup>20</sup> Our clothes go everywhere with us and our

bedcovers function in extreme proximity to our bodies. By bringing together the intimacy of clothing and bedcovers with the utilitarian *bottaris*, the distinction between the two becomes blurred and their functions homogenous. We cannot escape the ways in which clothing and other textiles are marked by our everyday lives and therefore harbour our emotions, energies, and experiences. With *Sewing into Walking*, Kimsooja demonstrates the feelings that exist behind human migration.

This focus on human migration draws attention to the ways in which the world has become increasingly globalized. Livingstone and Ploof define globalization as an international phenomenon that opens international trade on a cross-border scale involving “economic, technological, political, and cultural exchanges” that are made possible through “modern communications, transportation, and legal infrastructure.”<sup>21</sup> While globalization does tend to exist most extensively within this framework, it can also be applied to myriad aspects of culture, including things like religion and philosophy. It should be noted that globalization and its counterpart, capitalism, have emerged out of colonialism and its continued existence in the present day. The presence of Buddhism in Korea is entangled with and impacted by the history of the country’s colonization. For centuries, Korea was under the persecution of the Chosŏn Dynasty (1392-1910) which favoured neo-Confucian ideology and disallowed the practice of Buddhism and, in fact, banned Buddhist monks and nuns from entering the capital city until 1895.<sup>22</sup> When the dynasty fell in 1910, Korea was then annexed to

<sup>17</sup> Laeticia Mello, “The Pilgrimage of Our Own Existence: An Art Where Nomadism and the Relation with the Other Reveals the Importance of Mankind and the Contemplation of the Reality that we Live in,” Kimsooja, 2012, accessed March 21, 2018, [http://www.kimsooja.com/texts/mello\\_2012.html](http://www.kimsooja.com/texts/mello_2012.html), para 4.

<sup>18</sup> Jaquelynn Baas and Mary Jane Jacob, *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 213.

<sup>19</sup> Pascale Engelmaier, *Buddhism* (London: Hodder Education, 2013), 7.

<sup>20</sup> Joan Livingstone and John Ploof, *The Object of Labor: Art, Cloth, and Cultural Production* (Chicago: School of the Art Institute of Chicago Press, 2007), vii.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, vi.

<sup>22</sup> Jin Y. Park, *Makers of Modern Korean Buddhism*, 1-2.

Japan for the next 35 years.<sup>23</sup> During this time, the Japanese considered the Koreans to be “uncivilized and illiterate people” and because of this they endeavoured to assimilate them into Japanese culture by way of a so-called “civilizing mission” not unlike those carried out by the European colonizers.<sup>24</sup>

When Korea did finally gain independence from Japan in 1945, the country was divided into North and South as we know it today. Buddhism needed to be re-established and re-contextualized not only to reflect the unique culture of Korea but also to reassert its relevance in this recovering society.<sup>25</sup> The fact that Korea was colonized by a country that shares the same dominant religion made their experience of colonialism and the rebuilding afterwards both unique and complicated. After many years of having Korean Buddhism suppressed because of the reinforcement of either Chinese neo-Confucianism or Japanese Buddhism and now having the country divided, reformists had to work hard to bring Buddhism back into the lives of Korean citizens. To accomplish this, the line had to be blurred between ordained and lay practitioners and the combining of Buddhist religion and day to day life encouraged.<sup>26</sup> The reframing of Buddhism in the South Korean context occurred alongside the sudden exposure to a Westernized capitalist economy which meant that a level of hybridism, that is, a bringing together of old traditions and newer adaptations, became essential.<sup>27</sup> Accordingly, the notion of hybridity

repeatedly comes up as a central theme in Korean art.<sup>28</sup> Kimsooja’s art walks the line between “the tradition of everyday life and radical innovation” since it involves traditional and new techniques of art making and an understanding of how Eastern and Western philosophies, religions, cultures, and economies interact.<sup>29</sup>

### *Cities on the Move*

The performative video *Cities on the Move – 2727 Kilometers Bottari Truck, Korea* is exemplary of the blending of traditional and new techniques in Kimsooja’s art because while the subject matter is specific to her experience of living in the East, the method in which it is presented can be said to be influenced by Western convention in video art. Here, the *bottari* make another appearance, but this time they are piled into the back of a pick-up truck. Documentary style, the viewer watches as the truck transports the artist and the overwhelmingly large pile of *bottari* across the South Korean landscape, passing through every place Kimsooja lived as a child or has a personal tie to.<sup>30</sup> The framing of the video remains fixed upon the artist who can be seen sitting in the lotus position with her back to the camera atop the *bottari* pile, making herself a simultaneously anonymous figure and the subject of the artwork. In order to accomplish this expansive project, Kimsooja undertook an 11-day journey.<sup>31</sup> Describing her ex-

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>24</sup> Vjayanti Raghavan and R. Mahalakshmi, eds., *Colonisation: A Comparative Study of Indian and Korea* (New Delhi: Academic Foundation, 2015), 383 and 388.

<sup>25</sup> Park, *Makers of Modern Korean Buddhism*, 2.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>27</sup> Fleming, Centennial Gallery, and Oakville Galleries, *Soo-Ja Kim: A Laundry Field – Sewing into Walking, Looking into Sewing*, 7.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>29</sup> Fleming, Centennial Gallery, and Oakville Galleries, *Soo-Ja Kim: A Laundry Field – Sewing into Walking, Looking into Sewing*, 7; and Jacob, “Essential Empathy,” para 6.

<sup>30</sup> Marente Bloemhevel, Toos van Kooten, Jan van Adrichem, and Kröller-Müller Museum, *Windflower*, 97; and Livingstone and Ploof, 298.

<sup>31</sup> Baas and Jacob, *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art*, 213, 215.

perience and the concept behind the artwork, Kimsooja says:

Because the *bottari* truck is constantly moving around and through this geography, viewers question the location of my body: My body – which is just another *bottari* on the move – is present, is tracing the past, and, at the same time, is heading for the future: nonstop movement by sitting still on the truck. And though I used myself in this work, I tried to locate a more universal point where time and space coincide.<sup>32</sup>

As with *Sewing into Walking, Cities on the Move* plays in loop which can be disorienting considering it documents a journey being made – where does it start and where does it end? The viewer will most likely happen upon the video not at its intended starting point which may function as a commentary on the experience of nomadism in the Korean context. Essential to the message of the performance, the *bottari* are culturally specific items being used by Kimsooja as devices for addressing and recalling the fact that Korean history is full of stories of people being “forced to leave their homes in order to flee war or famine or to look for work,” making them signifiers for mobility in times of strife.<sup>33</sup> At the same time, though, the anonymity of her figure enables the viewer to envision themselves in her position.

The experience of nomadism is not always voluntary. A tenet of Buddhism involves the acceptance of change as a necessary and unavoidable

part of life that transforms each of us.<sup>34</sup> By packing up their lives into *bottari* and moving away from their struggles in search of security, Korean citizens fled their struggles with war, famine, and unemployment in search of change, security, and prosperity. Having to adapt to a nomadic lifestyle for survival is the epitome of accepting change. Kimsooja has spoken about her childhood which consisted of moving frequently because of her father’s military job. This upbringing informed her artistic practice and led her to focus on issues of dislocation and impermanence sparked by her fascination with the ways in which minorities experience nomadism.<sup>35</sup> Despite having herself moved so much, Kimsooja admits that it took her some time before she came to the realization that her family had been repeatedly wrapping and unwrapping *bottaris* of their own in order to move from one Korean city to the next.<sup>36</sup>

Keeping notions of hybridity and globalization in mind, it is important to acknowledge how the East and West interact with one another. Orientalism, a term coined and defined by Edward Said, is “...a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident’” that encourages the development of a clear separation between the two which places them in firm opposition to one another.<sup>37</sup> Usually, this opposition operates in favour of representing and defining the Occident or the West as superior to the Orient or the East. Rasheed Araeen describes that in order to be completely liberated from any form of colonial-

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> JLivingstone and Ploof, *The Object of Labor: Art Cloth, and Cultural Production*, 298.

<sup>34</sup> Engelmajer, *Buddhism*, 129.

<sup>35</sup> Bansie Vasvani, “An Artist Invites Viewers to Attain Stillness of Mind Together,” Hyperallergic, November 30, 2016, accessed April 8, 2018, <http://www.hyperallergic.com/341419/an-artist-invites-viewers-to-attain-stillness-of-mind-together/>, para 3; and Mello, “The Pilgrimage of Our Own Existence,” para 5.

<sup>36</sup> Mello, “The Pilgrimage of Our Own Existence,” para 5.

<sup>37</sup> Edward W. Said, excerpts from “Orientalism,” in *Contemporary Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Padmini Mongia (London: Arnold, 1996 [1978]), 21.

ism, “both the colonizer and the colonized [must] liberate themselves at the same time.”<sup>38</sup> This dismantling of colonialism must be a mutual agreement and requires mutual effort. As history shows, though, the West regularly refuses or is hesitant to let go of its colonial power, making it impossible for the overall process of colonialism to come to an end. This signifies to us that we are actually living in a neo-colonial world, not a post-colonial one.<sup>39</sup> Neo-colonialism perpetuates the Western view that those from the East are threatening, uncivilized ‘Others’ that need to be controlled in some way by the West.

Simply put, the relationship that has been forged between the East and the West by way of colonialism and Orientalism is a relationship of unequal power dynamics and Western domination.<sup>40</sup> The domination of the West over the East allows the West to portray the East in whichever way it sees fit, often in a concerted effort to maintain Western superiority. As Araeen makes clear, the neo-colonial “subject...cannot be separated from the white/European subject: both are entangled in a post-colonial struggle for redefinition.”<sup>41</sup> For, at this point, what is the East without the West and the West without the East?

As a consequence of orientalism, the Eastern body has been repeatedly depicted in art as highly sexualized and without agency. The imagery, created by artists and people from the West, was and continues to be most often used to tanta-

lize the Western viewer and misrepresent the Eastern subject. Reina Lewis asserts that:

The gap between the Oriental performer and the Occidental viewer/reader emphasizes the always intersubjective quality of the processes by which performative action is decoded...The ways in which the stereotype misfits will not only be different each time, but the gaps and frayings from the original will themselves be differently recognizable to differently formed subject.<sup>42</sup>

All this to say that orientalism and colonialism construct negative, deceptive, and racist stereotypes for people from the East. Above all else, the Orient and the conceptualization of there being a difference between the East and the West is an entirely Western fabrication and invention which perpetuates and sustains the exoticization of human beings, landscapes, and ways of life.<sup>43</sup>

Kimsooja explores the constructed opposition that Orientalism incites through “paradoxical juxtaposition,” or the constant drawing of parallels between Eastern and Western cultures, traditional and post-modern ways of thinking, and the spiritual and the material.<sup>44</sup> By using her body to both create and perform artworks, Kimsooja chooses how she is represented and can therefore use her agency to contradict and negate racist and orientalist stereotypes. As a result, she is inherently present in her works, whether it be through the trace of her hand on her sewn *bottari* or in how her physical body is showcased in her performative

<sup>38</sup> Rasheed Araeen, “The artist as a post-colonial subject and this individual’s journey towards ‘the centre,’” in *Views of Difference: Different Views of Art*, ed. Catherine King (Hartford: Yale University Press, 1999), 232.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Said, excerpts from “Orientalism,” 23.

<sup>41</sup> Araeen, “The artist as a post-colonial subject and this individual’s journey towards ‘the centre,’” 231.

<sup>42</sup> Reina Lewis, “Cross-Cultural Reiterations: Demetra Vaka Brown and the Performance of Racialized Female Beauty,” in *Performing the Body/Performing the Text*, eds. Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson (Hoboken: Routledge, 1999), 71-72.

<sup>43</sup> Said, excerpts from “Orientalism,” 20.

<sup>44</sup> Jim Drobnick, *Listening Awry: Kimsooja, Christian Marclay, Santiago Sierra, Su-Mei Tse* (Hamilton: McMaster Museum of Art, 2007), 19.

videos both actively and passively. For, as Diana Augaitis states, “it is through the body that we perceive and act in the world.”<sup>45</sup> It is this sentiment is important to keep in mind in relation to how Kimsooja explores the many ways we relate as human beings. Having been exposed to the sometimes radical methods of Western performance art, Kimsooja takes a more pared down approach, opting to “interact directly with nature or in the realm in which real life occurs” – she does not want to just show something to her audience, but wants to “offer an experience for both the audience” and herself.<sup>46</sup> This ties into the contemporary idea of art as a path of self-discovery or realization for both the artist and the viewer, as I discussed earlier. When we view art, in philosopher John Dewey’s view, we are given the opportunity to understand not only ourselves, but others (and Others<sup>47</sup>) as well – we are presented with a chance to experience the lives of others and empathize or relate to them from our own personal contexts.<sup>48</sup>

The ways in which time influences artistic practice and aesthetics is discussed at length by Homi Bhabha in “Another Country.” He argues that it is a common tendency amongst artists who have experienced diaspora, oppression, and/or colonialism to turn towards slower artistic means of production such as embroidery, weaving, painting, or explicitly incorporating notions of duration and temporality into their art.<sup>49</sup> Bhabha calls us to question the connections between “the time internal to the work, the historical time-period, and the temporal or historical assumptions of interpreta-

tional discourses” when observing works by artists from this sort of background.<sup>50</sup> Kimsooja draws our attention to the importance of time in contemporary art as her *bottari* take time to make and her videos are often exhibited in slow motion. The making of the artwork “requires intervention of a delayed or lagged temporality” utilized to “disrupt the global reach of digital immediacy.”<sup>51</sup> A globalized world is made possible through and therefore relies on technology; the digitization of the world has made us live on our impulses, crave immediate results, and expect everything to happen in the blink of an eye. Artworks are the duration that they are for a reason, however having to pay attention to these time-consuming, slow works proves difficult in this hurried technological age. It is important to remember, though, that “the diverse elements or processes” of an artwork “each carry [their] own cultural and formal signature” which intersect, giving the art its “visual presence.”<sup>52</sup>

### ***A Laundry Woman—Yamuna River, India and A Needle Woman***

Kimsooja’s performative videos *A Laundry Woman – Yamuna River, India* and *A Needle Woman* are evocative of this attention paid to time in art that Homi Bhabha describes. Both are presented in slow motion and their locations quite nondescript. Although the location for *A Laundry Woman* is explicitly indicated in the title and therefore relevant to the work, had it been omitted the location would not have been identifiable beyond being a body of water. *A Needle Woman* is a recur-

<sup>45</sup> Diana Augaitis, “Kimsooja: Ways of Being – A Conversation between Diana Augaitis and Kimsooja,” Kimsooja, 2014, accessed March 4, 2018, [http://www.kimsooja.com/texts/diana\\_augaitis\\_2014.html](http://www.kimsooja.com/texts/diana_augaitis_2014.html), para 1.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, para 16.

<sup>47</sup> The distinction between “others” and “Others” exists here to mark the difference between those who are simply not ourselves and those groups of people whose identity (sexuality, race, ability, ethnicity, citizenship status, etc.) are grounds for their oppression. In the context of Orientalism, Others are ordinarily positioned as being members of the Orient or the East.

<sup>48</sup> Jacob, “Essential Empathy,” para 10-11.

<sup>49</sup> Homi Bhabha, “Another Country,” in *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking*, exhibition curated by Fereshteh Daffari (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2006), 30 and 32.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 30-31.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.



ring series throughout Kimsooja's oeuvre, the particular installment I will be discussing shortly was filmed in Paris. However, the location is not indicated in the title and therefore gives the sense of it occurring in any place at any time. Location and place are always an important factor in Kimsooja's work as she endeavours to answer questions about what a place is, how it relates to the body, how bodies relate to places, and how places are experienced through meditative action.<sup>53</sup> Further, in the two videos the human body is shown as a "completely natural element" that is "anonymous, impersonal, [and] objective."<sup>54</sup> Kimsooja is always facing away from the camera, making her a "faceless and unidentifiable" body which means that, again, the viewer could see themselves in her position.<sup>55</sup>

*A Laundry Woman* is a minimal and meditative single-channel performative video that depicts the artist standing, with her back to us, on the bank of one of India's holy rivers: the Yamuna River.<sup>56</sup> The river is located in Northern India, placing it close in proximity to the birthplace of Buddhism. Throughout the entire video, Kimsooja remains perfectly still, the only traceable movement being that of the calm tributary river flowing slowly past which fills the entire frame. The river carries with it floating tree branches, leaves, and other debris while also reflecting the sky and birds. This contributes to the dissolving of the "boundaries between sky, river, and ground" which gives the work a painterly feel.<sup>57</sup> The sky is not *truly* there,

the birds flying are not *real* birds – everything is merely a reflection and as a result, Kimsooja views the river itself "as a mirror of reality."<sup>58</sup> The artist's lack of movement in this performance classifies it as a sort of non-performance, her body is utterly passive and the scene around her undoubtedly serene.

The Yamuna River, as I mentioned, is a holy tributary river that is connected to the Ganges. Where Kimsooja filmed *A Laundry Woman* was located near an area where funerary cremations took place. So, "the floating [items] on the surface of the river included flowers and debris from cremations" and funerals.<sup>59</sup> With this knowledge, the work immediately becomes about the complexity (or simplicity) of human mortality, impermanence, and existence. The artist looks out onto the river and the debris floating on it, observing the life and death of countless anonymous people and also herself.<sup>60</sup> While the final version of the video was cut down to ten minutes and thirty seconds, Kimsooja actually stood on the river bank, motionless, for almost an hour.<sup>61</sup> During this time, she recalls having difficulty determining whether it was her or the river that was moving because she was so consumed with her focus on staying still and maintaining a meditative state.<sup>62</sup> Her contemplation opened up her consciousness and her confusion about what was producing movement – her body or the river? – led to her realizing the essence of the work:

<sup>53</sup> Morgan, "Kimsooja and the Art of Place," para 1.

<sup>54</sup> Musée d'Art Moderne Saint-Etienne, ed., *Kimsooja*, 11.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Dewana and Vali, *Post Object*, 19.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Baas and Jacob, *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art*, 217.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Augaitis, "Kimsooja: Ways of Being – A Conversation between Diana Augaitis and Kimsooja," para 29; and Baas and Jacob, *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art*, 217.

I finally realized that it is the river that is changing all the time in front of this still body, but it is my body that will be changed and vanish very soon, while the river will remain there, moving slowly, as it is now.<sup>63</sup>

Kimsooja's recognition of ephemerality through this meditative experience articulates the Buddhist practice of accepting the fact of impermanence – nothing remains stagnant and everything is in constant flux.<sup>64</sup> Another aspect of Buddhist thought that pertains to *A Laundry Woman* is that of 'bare' or 'naked attention' which involves "the clear and single-minded awareness of what actually happens to us and in us, at the successive moments of perception."<sup>65</sup> Through meditation, we are able to analyze mental reactions, emotions, and life events separately through detached and receptive ways of thinking that make us aware of our surroundings, individual interiority, and higher levels of consciousness. The experience of performing *A Laundry Woman* gave Kimsooja the awareness of mortality which happens to all of us and in all of our bodies. Sot'aesan's conceptualization of Timeless Zen and Placeless Zen is also applicable here, as it advocates for people to "maintain the Zen mind anytime and anywhere," making it possible to access enlightenment throughout "daily mundane life."<sup>66</sup> Through a considerably banal activity, Kimsooja has been able to gain an appreciation for the brevity of life – an appreciation she hopes the viewer gains as well when they encounter the work.

Banality and anonymity are also featured and explored in the single-channel performative video *A Needle Woman* wherein Kimsooja stands completely still, again facing away from the camera, this time in the middle of a busy and crowded street in Paris. The title itself, using the non-descript article 'A' rather than the more specific 'The,' emphasizes the anonymity not only of Kimsooja's faceless central figure, but of all the people that push past her on the street. Further, the title is referential not only to Kimsooja's works with *bot-tari*, but also to the function of her body in this context. In the way that needles and thread weave together fabrics, Kimsooja views her body as weaving together "the social...context of the different geographic locations" and the different people she encounters through the series.<sup>67</sup>

As with *A Laundry Woman*, the actual performance of *A Needle Woman* took much longer than the six-minute result – the artist actually stood on the street for 25 to 30 minutes.<sup>68</sup> The performance took this long because it was crucial for Kimsooja to harness meditation and focus, which takes time and patience. She needed to be able to deflect the multiple energies coming at her from all the people walking past.<sup>69</sup> As Kimsooja herself explains:

While I was standing still and remaining centered, I experienced an incredible transition in my mind from vulnerability to a focused, meditative and enlightened state of mind. That is when my mind and eyes entered the reality of a large universe, seeing the white light beyond the horizon of

<sup>63</sup> Baas and Jacob, *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art*, 217.

<sup>64</sup> Engelmajer, *Buddhism*, 129.

<sup>65</sup> Baas and Jacob, *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art*, 31.

<sup>66</sup> Park, *Makers of Modern Korean Buddhism*, 68-69.

<sup>67</sup> Bloemheuvel, van Kooten, van Adrichem, and Kröller-Müller Museum, *Windflower: Perceptions of Nature*, 102.

<sup>68</sup> Baas and Jacob, *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art*, 215.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

the waves of people coming and going. This powerful experience of enlightenment enabled me to meet the people of the world's most crowded cities.<sup>70</sup>

By carrying out this level of meditation, Kimsooja enacts the Buddhist practice of being mindful of the body; what it is doing, how it is positioned, how it feels, and where it is located.<sup>71</sup> This connects to Sot'aesan's principle of Maintaining One Suchness when both in motion and at rest. Kimsooja Maintains One Suchness in both *A Needle Woman* and *A Laundry Woman* – a principle which involves retaining a commitment to the enlightened state of mind at all times, regardless of where you find yourself.<sup>72</sup> So, whether you are standing along on the bank of a calm and quite holy river or if you are standing on a noisy, busy street you are called to preserve a meditative state. In both of these contemplative videos, Kimsooja senses her environment and surroundings and inserts her passive yet “active pose” and “relaxed aura” which transforms her physical and spiritual presence in the space into an absence – being into non-being.<sup>73</sup>

*A Laundry Woman* and *A Needle Woman* prompt questions about where the performance is taking place and about where and what the artwork is. For *A Needle Woman* specifically, David Morgan asks whether the art is in how the crowd surrounding Kimsooja seems completely unaware of her presence or if it exists, instead, amongst the

crowd watching the final product in a gallery space.<sup>74</sup> Regardless of *where* the art is, the steadiness of Kimsooja's body in both videos becomes our point of reference throughout. So, even when she is engulfed by the crowd in *A Needle Woman*, she is transcending “the world out there by holding her back irresolutely towards us, here” wherever we may be.<sup>75</sup> Place in these two works is not a singular thing, but rather encapsulates the multiple places in which the artworks take place: on the bank of the Yamuna River in India, on the streets of Paris, in the gallery spaces that exhibit them, and in the minds of the artist and the viewer – these performances were recorded with the intention of being shown elsewhere from where they took place.<sup>76</sup>

Barry Allen, in his book *Artifice and Design: Art and Technology in Human Experience*, discusses the idea of ‘a people's art’ wherein artistic expression is not always about individual feelings or experiences of the artist, but can sometimes also resonate with the feelings and experiences of groups of people with common interests, identities, or geographies.<sup>77</sup> As such, Kimsooja uses her art as a tool for establishing “link[s] between different spheres [and] different contexts.”<sup>78</sup> The mental and emotional unity that Kimsooja's work manifests operates as an aesthetic, it is the beauty of the work – a spiritual connection forged that can be said to reflect a progression towards enlightenment or absolute knowledge.<sup>79</sup> Contemporary artists have a tendency to make use of the living/lived

<sup>70</sup> Augaitis, “Kimsooja: Ways of Being – A Conversation between Diana Augaitis and Kimsooja,” para 23.

<sup>71</sup> Engelmajer, *Buddhism*, 128.

<sup>72</sup> Park, *Makers of Modern Korean Buddhism*, 69.

<sup>73</sup> Musée d'Art Moderne Saint-Etienne, ed., *Kimsooja*, 19.

<sup>74</sup> Morgan, “Kimsooja and the Art of Place,” para 9.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, para 10.

<sup>76</sup> Morgan, “Kimsooja and the Art of Place,” para 10.

<sup>77</sup> Barry Allen, *Artifice and Design: Art and Technology in Human Experience* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 93.

<sup>78</sup> Musée d'Art Moderne Saint-Etienne, ed., *Kimsooja*, 13.

<sup>79</sup> Allen, *Artifice and Design*, 93.

experiences of their bodies in as one of the main sources for their work. In Kimsooja's case, as we have seen, her body becomes both a medium and an instrument, demonstrating how the senses and the body "can be used directly to access the spiritual, eternal, and universal."<sup>80</sup>

## Conclusion

Contemporary art is bound up in the process of globalization – along with capitalism, neo-colonialism, and orientalism – and therefore should be viewed as a "system of artistic production and reception" which has become more or less standardized over time.<sup>81</sup> Since the advent of contemporary art and all the diverse artistic movements it contains, there has been great debate over what it means to eliminate the separation that has existed between art and life.<sup>82</sup> Be it through the generalization of personal experiences or through the creation of communal art installations, Kimsooja is constantly bringing her life and the lives of others into her contemporary artistic practice. A significant thing that sets contemporary art apart from its precursors is its opinion that art resides in the mind of the viewer and not necessarily only in the mind of the artist or in the created art object. In Kimsooja's art, though, we see how the art exists in all aspects of the artistic experience: from the artist's initial concept, to the creation of the artwork itself, and to how it is received by the viewer. Art, basically, is a means of "representing, recording, documenting, and thereby visually, conceptually, or emotionally revealing the world "as it is,"" albeit from the standpoint of the artist.<sup>83</sup> The standpoint of the artist is important because it is influenced by their personal belief system which is

contextualized by things like gender, race, education, family, religion, and social class. As Diepeveen and Van Laar put it, "whatever artists choose to do with their art, whatever social role they take on, their work is laden with beliefs about art, and about human, cultural, and environmental relationships."<sup>84</sup> As such, notions of a 'pure idea' or 'art for art's sake' can be considered almost impossible as art is intrinsically connected to an artist's social, cultural, and/or geographic location. Kimsooja's exposure to both Eastern and Western modes of thought and culture enables her to combine and explore the similarities and differences between the two in her art, therefore creating a practice that, in many ways, encapsulates the entire world.

Kimsooja's art puts forward a concept of universality based on the idea of shared humanity which can be interpreted as problematic as it seems to reference notions of multiculturalism. It is not uncommon, as Rasheed Araeen notes, for artists of colour to be viewed as spokespersons for all people of their race, ethnicity, or country. This view ignores the possibility for their artistic practice to be viewed as an individual experience that is separate from their race. Instead, artists of colour are designated, through Western convention, the job of expressing themselves on behalf of their entire community.<sup>85</sup> However, this is not the case with Kimsooja's art as she uses the stillness of mind promoted by Buddhist teachings to showcase "the similarities between different cultures" in an attempt to "offer some resolution in...times of war, paranoia, fear, and discrimination."<sup>86</sup> Kimsooja's artistic practice calls on us to remember that we are all people. She does not ask us to ignore differ-

<sup>80</sup> Tessa Adams, "Contemporary Art and the Revisioning of Identity," *International Journal of Jungian Studies* 1, no. 1 (March 2009): 51; and Jacob, "Essential Empathy," para 8.

<sup>81</sup> Camiel van Winkel, *During the Exhibition the Gallery Will be Closed: Contemporary Art and the Paradoxes of Conceptualism* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2012), 273-274.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid*, 81.

<sup>83</sup> Leonard Diepeveen and Timothy van Laar, *Active Sights: Art as Social Interaction* (Mountain View California: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1998), 28.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*, 31 and 33.

<sup>85</sup> Araeen, "The artist as a post-colonial subject and this individual's journey towards 'the centre,' 233.

<sup>86</sup> Vasvani, "An Artist Invites Viewers to Attain Stillness of Mind Together," para 5.

ence, but to instead focus on similarity through emotions such as empathy and to recognize how we should support each other on a global scale. It is about recognizing the expansiveness of the human condition.

Ossian Ward states that there are artworks that “demand contemplation” and as such require that we take more time to experience them.<sup>87</sup> Kimsooja’s durational videos and tactile installations require our time, our contemplation, and our consciousness. *Cities on the Move* is culturally specific and yet speaks to the history of forced migration in difficult times which has been experienced by many people all over the world in a variety of different contexts. Kimsooja’s Buddhist worldview and continued practice of meditation in both her everyday life and in her art is contagious – the viewer must exhibit a level of heightened consciousness in order to achieve the full experience and to witness the powerful energy of human connection that is at the centre of Kimsooja’s practice.

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<sup>87</sup> Ossian Ward, “Chapter 8: Art as Meditation,” in *Ways of Looking: How to Experience Contemporary Art* (London: Laurence King Publishing Ltd., 2014), 150.

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