

Kimsooja



MARY JANE JACOB LET'S TALK ABOUT HOW SEWING HAS BEEN A CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICE FOR YOU AND A WAY OF CONNECTING YOUR BODY TO A GREATER WHOLE?

KIMSOOJA One day in 1983, I was sewing a bedcover with my mother and then at the very moment when I passed the needle through the fabric's surface, I had a sensation like an electric shock, the energy of my body channeled through the needle, seeming to connect to the energy of the world. From that moment, I understood the power of sewing: the relationship of needle to fabric is like my body to the universe, and the fundamental relationship of things and structure were in it. From this experience, for about ten years, I worked with cloth and clothes, sewing and wrapping them, processes shared with contemplation and healing. By 1992, I started making bundles, or *bottari* in Korean—I always used old clothes and traditional Korean bedcovers—that retain the smells of others' lives, memories, and histories, though their bodies are no longer there—embracing and protecting people, celebrating their lives and creating a network of existences.

KOREA WAS NOT A VERY VISIBLE PART OF THE CONTEMPORARY ART WORLD. YOU YOURSELF CAME TO THE U.S. IN 1992 ON A RESIDENCY AT P.S. 1 IN NEW YORK. THEN IN 1995 KOREA JOINED THE RANKS OF INTERNATIONAL BIENNALE PRESENTERS IN THE SOUTHWESTERN CITY OF KWANGJU, A PLACE WHERE KOREAN AND AMERICAN IDENTITY IS SADLY LINKED.¹

This is the site of a national tragedy. It is marked by anniversary re-enactments each year. With my work for the first biennale there, *Sewing into Walking—Dedicated to the Victims of Kwangju* (1995), I placed two and one-half tons of clothes in bundles on a mountainside. It was the image of the sacrificed bodies. People could walk on them, listening to the song "Imagine" by John Lennon which, through the audiences' bodies, evoked the confrontation of stepping on bodies and guilty conscience, as well as memorializing the victims' lives. Over the two months of the show, the seasons changed and the clothes became mixed with the soil, rain, and fallen leaves, becoming like dead bodies: this was the installation scene I wished to create for the viewers. The audience—the Korean people—opened the bundles and removed nearly one ton of clothes; they hung some onto the trees and took others away with them.

¹ In May 1980 students and other demonstrators against martial law were killed by government forces with brutal force, with the death toll, many believed, mounting to 2,000; officials claimed only 191. The U.S. was implicated in support of President Chun Doowhan, who had seized power in a military junta, and in a wave of botched diplomatic efforts that followed.

HAVE YOUR WORKS ALWAYS HAD AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL OR CULTURAL ROOTS?

When I went back to Korea in 1993, after spending time in the U.S. and gaining a different perspective on my own culture and gender roles in Korean life, I reconfronted the society as a woman and as a woman artist. I started realizing my own personal history in *bottari* projects, using them more as real *bottari* than for an aesthetic context. My first video performance piece, *Sewing into Walking—Kwangju* (1994), resulted from an installation; in its documentation I recognized that my own body was a sewing tool, a needle that invisibly wraps, weaves, and sews different fabrics and people together in nature.

For my next video performance, *Cities on the Move—2727 Kilometers Bottari Truck* (1997), I made an eleven-day journey throughout Korea atop a truck loaded with *bottaris*, visiting cities and villages where I used to live and have memories. 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 in the 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.

I realize now that this work emerged from the history of my family moving from one place to another almost every two years, mostly near the DMZ area, because of my father's job in the military. We were wrapping and unwrapping bundles all the time; we were endlessly in a new environment, leaving people whom we loved behind and meeting new neighbors, as we passed from one city to another, one village to another. We were, in fact, nomads, and I am continuing the nomadic life as an artist, a condition which has become one of the main issues in contemporary art and society. Yet I am also aware that migration is just an extension of nature and we are literally in a state of migration at every moment.

*IT SEEMS LIKE SITES OUT IN THE WORLD
HAVE BECOME YOUR STUDIO FOR
MAKING ART AND AT THAT THE SAME
TIME A MEANS OF CONNECTING US
TO PLACES, TO EACH OTHER.*

Usually, I don't like to make or create anything in nature because I am really afraid of damaging it. Instead, I decide to use

existing elements which can be related to my idea of location/dislocation and its gravity and energy towards the future. In 1997 I did another work in this series, *Sewing into Walking—Istiklal Cadessi*, a video shoot in Istanbul. I experimented with documenting people coming and going through the fixed frame of the lens; it was an invisible way of sewing and wrapping people.

Then, with *A Needle Woman* project (1999–2001), I inserted myself in the middle of the busy street and looked towards the people of eight different metropolises in the world: Berlin, Cairo, Lagos, London, Mexico City, New York, Shanghai, and Tokyo. I considered my body to be a needle that weaves different people, societies, and cultures together by just standing still. Inverting the notion of performing by remaining fixed within the crowd, my body functioned like a barometer, showing more by doing nothing. The needle is an evident yet ambiguous tool: androgynous, maintaining contradiction within it. The needle functions only as a medium; it never remains at the site and disappears at the end. It just leaves traces, connecting or healing things.

Each performance lasted twenty-five to thirty minutes, during which I just stared straight ahead. I eventually cut each tape into an unedited section six minutes and thirty seconds long. In the beginning I had a difficulty resisting all the energies from people coming at me. By the middle of the performance I was centered and focused, and could become liberated from them. In the beginning my body was very, very tense, but in the end I was just smiling, liberated from all attention. I could see the

A Needle Woman—London, New York, New Delhi, Mexico City, Cairo, and Shanghai (from left to right, top to bottom), 1999–2001

light coming from the back, far from the front, over these waves of people. I was in complete enlightenment.

I didn't know where the smile came from but I was just smiling. Maybe it was the moment when I was freed from my self-consciousness and engaged with the whole picture of the world and people as oneness and totality beyond this stream or ocean of people in the street. I think enlightenment can be gained by seeing reality as it is: a whole which is a harmonious state within contradiction that requires no more intentional adjustment or healing.

YOUR POSTURE SEEMS TO PROFOUNDLY COMMUNICATE, BRINGING US DIRECTLY INTO THE EXPERIENCE; SOMETIMES WE STAND IN FOR YOU, SOMETIMES WE ARE IN THE CROWD. SO WHILE IN A NEEDLE WOMAN WE DO NOT HAVE YOUR EXPERIENCE; AS IT WAS FOR YOU IN REAL TIME, WE NONETHELESS HAVE A DEEP EXPERIENCE THROUGH YOUR ART. YOU BECOME A PORTAL THROUGH WHICH WE PASS TO HAVE OUR OWN EXPERIENCE; YOU ARE A CONDUIT FOR OTHERS' EXPERIENCE; YOU ARE THE NEEDLE THROUGH WHICH THEY PASS, THE EMPATHETIC LOCUS. AND BECAUSE IN THE GALLERY WE ARE IN THE CENTER OF THE WORLD—LOOKING AT EIGHT CITIES AT ONCE—THIS WORK IS ALSO ABOUT RELATIONALITY AND THE INTERDEPENDENCE OF HUMAN BEINGS AND ALL BEINGS IN NATURE.

I did another performance called *A Needle Woman—Kitakyshu, Japan* (1999), lying my body down on a limestone mountain, the front turned away from the viewer. Nothing changes in this video except the natural light from the sky and a little bit of breeze; at the end there is one fly that is just passing by against the slow movement of the

clouds. Of course, I had to control my breath, so my shoulders wouldn't move; I taught myself how to breathe with my stomach. I was there a pretty long time. The rock was a little bit cold, but it was just so peaceful. I was completely abandoning my will and desire to nature and I was at such a peace. There is one face of nature that caresses the human being in the most harmless way. So we feel at absolute peace in this mild nature. Of course, when it becomes harmful, nothing can compete with its absolute damage.

In a way this work looks a little bit like the reclining Buddha, at the *parinirvana*. At the same time and in a different way, abandoning my ego, I consider it like a cruciform: my body located at the central point of four different elements, which are in between the sky and the earth, nature and human beings. I located myself on the borderline of the earth and the sky, facing nature and away from the viewers. In the beginning



of the video I think my body looks fragile and dramatic, feminine and provocative, an organic body or a body of desire. Over time, I find that my body, with its duration of stillness—breathing in the rhythm of nature—becomes itself a part of nature as matter, neutral, a transcendent state. To me it is like offering and serving my body to nature.

HAS PERFORMANCE BECOME AN ACTUAL PRACTICE OF MEDITATION FOR YOU, FOCUSING AND CENTERING, TO ATTAIN FOR YOUR SOMETHING CLOSE TO ENLIGHTENMENT, AS WELL AS TO GIVE AN EXPERIENCE TO THE VIEWER?

For me, the most important thing to arise out of these performances is my own experience of self and awakens. That's how I continue to ask deeper questions to the world and to myself. That is the enlightenment I encounter while doing this kind of performance. One such experience

occurred with *A Laundry Woman—Yamuna River, India* (2000). I was just looking at some different locations for a performance, but when I passed by this riverside, I immediately felt the energy and decided: Let's do it. Again I put my back to the viewer and looked to the river. It was right next to a cremation place on the Yamuna, so the floating images on the surface of the river were all flowers and debris from cremations. While I was facing the river, I was actually looking at anonymous people's life and death, including mine. It was a purifying experience, praying and celebrating. There's a lot of detail on the surface of the river, so I consider this piece as a painting. It's all reflection: there is no sky, but it looks like sky; there are no real birds passing, only reflections of birds from above. So, in a way, the river functions as a mirror of reality.

I decided to be there until the limit of my body. I was there for almost an hour in total. In the middle of standing there, I was completely confused: Is it the river that is

moving, or myself? My sense of time and space were turned completely upside down. I was asking and asking and asking again: Is it the river or myself? 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. In other words, the changing of our body into a state of death is like floating on the big stream of the river of the universe. Doing this performance gave me an important awakens.

It suddenly reminded me of one unforgettable dream that I had in my early twenties. I was looking down at Han River from a hillside in Seoul. After looking at the surface of the river for some time, my vision was fixed on the river and the movement of water inside it, showing me the bottom



A Homeless Woman—Cairo, 2001

