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Kimsooja's Bottari



Issue 3 of *Inscription* unfolds with its subject. Our cover is a detail of work by the contemporary South Korean artist, Kimsooja.

breathe in – breathe out

> In 1983, when I was making a bedcover with my mother, I was about to push the needle into the brilliant, soft and silky fabric – but when the needle touched the fabric, I experienced a revelation, as if the whole Universe's energy passed through my body to the tip of the needle. I immediately recognized the relation with this border, the surface, and the vertical woven structure that was penetrated by the needle. The fabric had a woven vertical and horizontal pattern (warp and weft) and I saw this as a way to investigate the surface of a structure as a painting. This action and experience was the moment that I interwove myself as a person who is innately vulnerable, seeking to connect with and embrace those around me.[1]

Needlework is key to Kimsooja's practice, but it is something she understands as a kind of enfolding or wrapping: wrapping the thread around the fabric, but also folding the fabric around various contents. In South Korea, families will often sew a special blanket or quilt in their family home. People contribute different patterns, textiles and fabrics. These blankets are invested with love and time. When people move home, they gather up their possessions, enfold them in these blankets, secure them with a knot at the top and then transport them from one place to another. These creased, bundled fabric containers for moving are called 'bottari' in Korean. The idea of a life contained and eminently moveable is anchored in Kimsooja's personal experience of living close to the Demilitarized Zone between North and South Korea:

> [W]e moved from one place to another almost every two years, mostly near the Demilitarized Zone, as my father worked in the military. We were wrapping and unwrapping bundles all the time. We were constantly in new environments, leaving people we loved and meeting new neighbours, as we passed from one city to another, one village to another.[2]

In 1992 whilst completing a residency at P.S.1 in New York, Kimsooja suddenly saw the bottari in her studio in a completely different light, no longer just as a container for transporting clothes and used fabrics but as a distinctive folded, and sculptural artefact. As she explained in a conversation with Park Young Taik:

> I never considered it to be an art object, only a functional object to store my fabrics. It suddenly occurred to me that the bottari was a sculpture and a painting in one. Just by tying the cloth together, I could transform the bottari from a flat surface into a three-dimensional sculpture. It was a revelatory moment for me.[3]

Kimsooja began making bottari as part of her work, using old clothes and traditional Korean bedcovers. They are, for Kimsooja, a way of folding various lives together into sculptural objects. The fabric of the bottari and the content it safely envelops retain the essence of a life: of its pain, joy and warmth. The history contained in the used clothes and bedcovers is therefore an essential part of her work:

> They retain the smells of others' lives, memories and histories, though their bodies are no longer there; they embrace and protect people, celebrating their lives, creating a network of existences.[4]

From recognising the sculptural potential of bottari, Kimsooja came to a new understanding of the bedcovers from which they are made: 'Bedcovers for me are frames for our bodies and lives, the most fundamental site of humanity where we are born, love, dream, rest, suffer, and finally die.'[5] She often returns to this sense of the bottari containing more than just clothes, a sense of time passing, history and memory: '[a] bottari carries minimal belongings that we hold on to until death, the shadow of life, arrives. It carries with it histories and memories.'[6] She also recognises the bottari bundle as a metaphor for the human body, one of the most complicated bottari there are, our skin marking the border between our inside and the outside, like the used silk bed covers enfolding the possessions, safeguarding them from the outside world. She has described the moving human body as 'a human bundle'.[7]

But these portable bundles, which can fold up tight or unfold to reveal a whole life, also suggest affinities with another folded structure, of course – the book. And indeed, Kimsooja has dallied with the idea of a book project, which she worked on for many years: 'We even made a bookcase mockup with 240 pages or so of images which I took from different flea markets around the world whenever I could find.' Though never finalized, this idea of bedclothes as folded receptacle carries distinct echoes of another piece of book art: *Quilt Memories*, created by the East German writer Christa Wolf in 1988. Using the fabric from a century-old patchwork quilt found in a New England farmhouse, Wolf sewed together a fragile folding codex structure, in which odd fragments and ephemera – newspaper cuttings, pressed flowers and leaves – are tucked away. The pages of this 'book' are literal sheets, therefore; their rough stitching a record of the generations of hands that made them, patched them, and kept them in use. They are layered with criss-crossing histories. As with Kimsooja's work, the folds of these discarded bedclothes are receptacles, retaining a kind of memory of the lives and bodies they came into contact with, as well as evoking a tradition of women's hidden labour and needlework.



Kimsooja, *Bottari*, 2011, used clothes and bed covers
Private Collection, courtesy of Kimsooja Studio.

The many vestigial journeys she folds in her colourful bottari led Kimsooja to undertake a very real one: for her *Cities on the Move, Bottari Truck* (1997), Kimsooja filled a truck with bottari and was driven through various Korean cities for 11 days, covering 2,727 kilometres, whilst sitting atop the bundles in transit. The work is a reflection on voluntary and involuntary migration: on the ways in which we are all in a transitory state, from birth to death, each bottari a journey of its own, the truck a *mise en abyme* of the constant wrapping of lives from one place to another.



Kimsooja, *Bottari Truck*, 2000
Courtesy of Leeum Samsung Fine Art Museum and Kimsooja Studio.
Photo by Kim Hyun Soo.

fold – unfold

Kimsooja's notion of the bottari as container, vessel, as carrier and protector of goods and experience, connects in important ways with our sense of *Inscription* as a structure for containing meaning. The original meaning of 'magazine' was something like a depot or holder for goods (from the Arabic *maḵzin*/*maḵzan* ('storehouse'), from *azana* ('store up')), and, in this spririt, we are interested in exploring the potential of a journal to be a kind of bottari – a storehouse the reader will unfold.

In her remarkable series *A Needle Woman* (1999–2001 (eight channel), 2005 (six channel) and 2009 (single channel)), Kimsooja performed an action of no action by standing completely still in some of the most crowded streets in the world, in Tokyo, New York, London, Mexico City, Cairo, Delhi, Shanghai, Lagos, Patan, Havana, Rio de Janeiro, N'Djamena, Sana and Jerusalem. In each location, a camera filmed her from behind and captured the multiple and varied reactions of passers-by to her stillness. There is something disconcerting and also powerful about the apparent non-action of standing motionless in a busy street, and, as the title suggests, Kimsooja became the instrument weaving people and cultures together, standing still and so causing the world to fold around her, parting and then reforming, altering its course before flowing again. Kimsooja has spoken about the version of enfolding stillness she experienced as she performed this work:



Kimsooja, *Cities on the Move – 2727 KM Bottari Truck*, 1997, single channel video, 7:33 min. loop, silent. Courtesy of Kimsooja Studio.

> At the beginning of the performance it was very difficult to stand still in the middle of a crowded street with all the people's energy coming towards me. I was determined to stand still; at the same time, I was in a vulnerable situation. I was totally exposed, but as time passed, I found my own centre. I became very focused and entered a meditative state. As I stood there, I felt myself begin to mentally embrace and wrap the people who were passing me. I entered a state of mind of total concentration and peace, which allowed me to experience a certain kind of enlightenment. When I looked at the horizon of the waves of oncoming people, I could see a bright light coming from beyond them, and I found myself looking at the entire humanity of the world.[8]

While *A Needle Woman* might appear at first distinct from the previous bottari project, Kimsooja recognises the frame of the camera as an 'image bottari' or as 'wrapped images'. The lens enfolds its objects. In discussing an earlier work where she was filming crowds in a bustling street in Istanbul (1997), Kimsooja refers to the camera lens as a wrapping device:

> I was just grasping and in a way enveloping the street, the people coming and going. I was very struck by this movement coming and going endlessly and I see the destiny of humanity in it. So, I wanted to wrap the scene. But there is the important element of why I started video work. It was not because I was interested in image making but I was thinking of the camera lens and the video screen as a bottari, as a bundle that wraps the immateriality of the reality of the world.[9]





Kimsooja, *A Needle Woman*, 1999–2001 (Performance video 8 channel)
Silent, 10:30 loop, still from Patan (Nepal). Courtesy of Kimsooja Studio.



Kimsooja, *A Needle Woman*, 1999–2001
Performance video 8 channel, silent, 10:30 loop, still from Lagos (Nigeria).
Courtesy of Kimsooja Studio.

The bottari and its intrinsically sculptural act of wrapping has informed much of Kimsooja's thinking. Her fundamental methodologies as an artist, as needlewoman, are sewing, weaving and wrapping various lives, cultures and clothes together. Curator and writer Christina Arum Sok Cabrera observes:

> Her work really opens up a new way of seeing the world from a totally unexpected perspective. She's an enlightened artist who goes beyond commenting or highlighting problems and negativity that's out there in the world. Instead she focuses on consciousness and calling out for a peaceful and a shared collective understanding and what it means to be human and to breathe and to share this world together as one humanity.[10]

Critic Robert C. Morgan likens her performance to the Buddhist concept of samadhi:

> [t]he way you describe this kind of cataclysmic stillness in the crowd, the way you use the metaphor of the bottari – the folding and the unfolding reminds me of the way you talk about the needle – it signifies for me something that I understand from the Sanskrit as samadhi – samadhi is, as you know, the highest form of meditation before Nirvana. In other words, in samadhi you can return to real life, real time, real space. Samadhi is presumably the state of the undivided self [...] there is no divided self because in the West, you often say there is the self and the other but in samadhi there is no self and the other, there is only this folding and unfolding.

We are delighted to have these ideas and artworks enfolded in issue 3 of *Inscription*.

> If Bottari truck is a bundle with clothes, an airplane is a bundle of people, the same as a subway train car. Bottari are everywhere, body and mind, womb and tomb, globe and universe, bundle of bundle of bundle [...] folding and unfolding our mind and geography, time and space.[11]

inhale – exhale

1. Kimsooja interviewed by Hou Hanra, 2017 'Create a New Light', in *Kimsooja: Interviews* (Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung, Walther König, 2002), pp. 200–201.
2. Kimsooja interviewed by Mary Jane Jacob, October 2002 and July 2003 in 'Essential Empathy', in *Kimsooja: Interviews*, p. 57.
3. Kim Sooja interviewed by Park Young Taik, 1996 'From Plane to Three Dimensions: A Bundle', in *Kimsooja: Interviews*, p. 23.
4. Kimsooja interviewed by Mary Jane Jacob, October 2002 and July 2003 in 'Essential Empathy', in *Kimsooja: Interviews*, p. 56.
5. Kimsooja interviewed by Gerald Matt, 'A Meditation on Art & Life', in *Kimsooja: Interviews*, p. 46.
6. Kim Sooja interviewed by Park Young Taik, 1996 'From Plane to Three Dimensions: A Bundle', in *Kimsooja: Interviews*, p. 25.
7. Epigraph in *Kimsooja: Interviews*, p. 19.
8. Points of Convergence Part I: Other-Self-World, Kimsooja in conversation with Andrew Maerkle, <kimsooja.com/texts/maerkle_part1_2011.html> [accessed 16 April 2022].
9. Kimsooja discussing her exhibition 'Performance/Video' at University Museum of Contemporary Art at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst with art critic Robert C. Morgan <youtube.com/watch?v=NZ8bzy6Mrko> [accessed 18 April 2022].
10. Brilliant Ideas, episode 45 <youtube.com/watch?v=P3Dq9dNmE-I> [accessed 16 April 2022].
11. Kimsooja talking to Hans Ulrich Obrist, 1998 in *Kimsooja: Interviews*, p. 37.