

A Needle Woman

Who became a needle

Elaine Kim

[A foreigner standing alone]

I am an Asian female immigrant from Korea living in Australia. My life takes place in a space between cultures, an exchange between Australia and Korea. It is not unusual for a combination of two cultures to create a new culture. While living as an immigrant in Australia, I was fortunate to experience a variety of cultures other than Korean culture, but the strangeness that I had to accept was that there were too many cultures from other countries, and these cultures collided with each other and confused my identity.

When I saw 'A Needle Woman' by Kimsooja's video performance artwork at the Art Gallery of NSW in Australia, I thought her work referred to the current era in which different cultures intersect and react.

In the video 'The Needle Woman', people pass by Kimsooja standing motionless in the middle of a city. People glance past her and sometimes their bodies collide.

The most eye-catching facet of 'A Needle Woman' is the back of the artist standing still in the centre of the screen, turned away from the audience. She has her long black hair neatly tied in a ponytail. No one knows what kind of expression is cast across her face.

In work, Kimsooja becomes 'A Needle Woman' and plays a needle connecting people and spaces. People in her inner-city busily brush past her, but she becomes a needle, piercing them.

The needle is expressed as Kimsooja herself, and her body is used as material for the viewer's self-reflection. She showed through her work that she strives to weave people with the world.



A Needle Woman, 1999 – 2001, 8 channel video projection, 6:33 loop, silent.

[Kimsooja]

Kimsooja performs 'A Needle Woman' in various cities worldwide. What is revealed in her work is that we are living in a more nomadic way today. There may be many reasons why this work had such an appeal to people from many countries,

but the creative idea itself of performing the same performance while traveling around the world must have been of great interest. Her work, which incorporates her Korean identity, is always compared to Western art and is also connected to the discourse of post-colonialism.¹

In 'A Needle Woman', she reveals an artist's identity that is not affected by changes in the surrounding environment as a solitary being and has a critical nomadic character that includes the artist's awareness of reality. Ultimately, the artist visually reveals the characteristics of the nomadic philosophy while crossing various thoughts. A place-based available repository appears as a process that occurs between multiple places and connect them with various meanings without placing anything special in the centre.² Through 'A Needle Woman', Kimsooja clearly raises the problematic relationship between the ego world and human beings in the middle of Tokyo, New York, London, Cairo, Delhi, Shanghai, Lagos, and Mexico City in an unfamiliar country.³ In 'A Needle Woman', Kimsooja takes on the role of a needle penetrating the various spaces of the world. Considering the geopolitical locations of cities worldwide where she executed this performance, it can be regarded as an act of needlework penetrating the entire globe. In 'A Needle Woman', who wanders the earth and performs conceptual needlework, she directly jumps into the midst of ordinary people living in various regions, communicating with them, and trying to heal them. During the performance, she exists as an outsider, thrown into another culture. The other side of Kimsooja looks unsettling to the viewer, for she maintains composure amid chaos and looks mysterious. In her artwork, she sees herself as a needle and her world as a cloth. To her, needlework is an act of breathing and communicating with the world. It has meaning as a therapeutic act, healing wounds.⁴

[Cultural Identities]

Cultural pluralism that accommodates various regional values and globalization has advanced the discussion of cultural identity, bringing new interests and approaches to the specific identities of regions or people.⁵ In the era of globalization where cultural exchanges are actively taking place, Kimsooja's work tends to immerse itself in a more fundamental contemplation rather than arouse curiosity with a specific cultural identity. In the process of nomadically wandering the world, she meets with heterogeneous cultures or contemplates the existence of human beings in culture. In Kimsooja's work, the meeting between different regions, civilization and culture, district and domain, study and discipline is possible. Nomad refers to spatial movement and the creative act of constantly changing oneself without clinging to specific values and ways of life, even while sitting in one place.

Kimsooja's work, as a cultural nomad, freely moves and travels around the world and expresses the hybridity of cultures by turning it into a space for creation and exhibition activities. As a Nomad, she rejects any spatial definition and restriction, or territorialisation. In other words, for settlers, stopping is more important than moving. On the contrary, for nomads, the process of moving itself can be seen as necessary. A nomad stops briefly in the course of the flow whilst moving.

In interpreting her artwork, cultural identity remains an important topic. Although this work compares various cultural identities due to each urban environment, it intends to tie them together as if by stitching rather than listing the differences. In this way, it weaves people from different parts of the world, gathered to create a single piece of work.

¹ L Lussier, *Kimsooja: Contemplating the Human Condition*, in, Carleton University, <<https://carleton.ca/aah/wp-content/uploads/RENDER-8-Lauren-Lussier.pdf>> [accessed 12 August 2021]

² M Kwon, "One Place after Another: Notes on Site Specificity", in *October*, vol. 80, 1997, 95.

³ Kim Sooja: A Needle Woman | MoMA", in *The Museum of Modern Art*, <<https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/4732>> [accessed 16 August 2021].

⁴ "Kimsooja - Kimsooja - Le Mois de la Photo à Montréal", in *MoisdelaPhoto.com*, <<https://moisdelaPhoto.com/en/artistes/kimsooja/>> [accessed 1 August 2021]

⁵ Y Wang, *Globalization Enhances Cultural Identity*, in, Harbin Engineering University, 2007, p. 83, <<https://web.uri.edu/iaics/files/09-Yi-Wang.pdf>> [accessed 15 August 2021].

[A Needle, Traditional Feminine Techniques]

Women used traditional feminine techniques to achieve their art. Modern female artists have used needlework, which was considered a part of housework, as a unique way of expressing women's experiences and sensibility.⁶

For example, Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro tried to recognize and celebrate the traditional roles historically assigned to women as works of art by directly exploring the subject of women's labour through 'Woman House'.⁷

Kimsooja expresses thoughts, sensibility and actions in works of art through the sewing she did with her mother. As a 'needle', she tries to weave everyday life, art, 'women's work' and philosophy into one. All the actions of Kimsooja in her art become needlework.⁸

Kimsooja's work is about rediscovering the value of women's labour while being alienated from the Confucian tradition, elevating, and expanding its meaning, and breaking the boundaries between everyday life and art.⁹

She embraces the realms of everyday life excluded by narrow modernism. She says that her needlework comes from the daily experience of helping her mother with needlework.¹⁰

Kimsooja, has a place in the history of feminist art in Korea and mainly has a strong character of mourning and healing for those who have been hurt. What if we assumed that a male artist did the same artwork as Kimsooja? Perhaps it will be interpreted entirely differently.

The femininity she expresses in Kimsooja's art further reinforces the feminist element through her work. Although she is a human being, she is living, not only as a woman, but also as a Korean woman. She cannot escape the fact that she is a Korean female artist. There are also problems and limitations of the era and issues that oppress women.¹¹

Kimsooja's work pioneered the art of embracing the world and surroundings by expanding and reproducing traditional materials and actions in a modern sense. In her artwork, she sublimated the steps of sewing, all traditionally performed by women, into a symbolic meaning that connects the divided relationships with others, even between nations and people.¹²

The body of the artist Kimsooja also disappears from the viewer's consciousness at a specific moment in the video. Still, as they continue to watch the video, the audience's consciousness shifts to the passing crowd from a specific moment. This is when the audience sees the world the artist sees by substituting their own body in the space where the artist's body has been removed.

After the needle performs its role of sewing the fabric, it disappears from where it was sewn, leaving only traces of the read.

A needle is a tool that can hurt, but as a medium, a needle is also a tool for healing. Through her own body as a needle, she wants to weave the relationship with the world as a universalized human being. In her 'Needle Woman', Kimsooja's

⁶ L Bravo, "Why Sewing And Crafts Should No Longer Be Seen As Just 'Women's Work'", in *ELLE*, , 2021,

<<https://www.elle.com/uk/fashion/a35709509/sewing-crafting-feminism-sustainability/>> [accessed 2 August 2021].

⁷ "Brooklyn Museum: Women's Work", in *Brooklynmuseum.org*, <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/easca/dinner_party/womens_work> [accessed 16 August 2021].

⁸ S Wendt, "kimsooja.com | Sewing into Life, Selene Wendt", in *Kimsooja.com*, 2013, <http://www.kimsooja.com/texts/Wendt_2013.html> [accessed 12 August 2021].

⁹ C Sok, "kimsooja.com | KIMSOOJA - Christina Arum Sok", in *Kimsooja.com*, , 2014, <http://www.kimsooja.com/texts/sok_2014.html> [accessed 6 August 2021].

¹⁰ *Kimsooja: Zone Of Nowhere*, in, Perth, PICA, 2021, p. 10, <<https://pica.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/EdNotes-Kimsooja.pdf>> [accessed 9 August 2021]

¹¹ S Rahmah et al., "Patriarchal Opression in Kim Ji-Yeong, Born 1982 By Cho Nam Joo: A Feminist Literary Study | KnE Social Sciences", in *Knepublishing.com*, <<https://knepublishing.com/index.php/KnE-Social/article/view/7428/13154>> [accessed 5 August 2021].

¹² K Nakane, "Kimsooja: A needle woman piercing the fabric of life | International Examiner", in *International Examiner*, , 2013,

<<https://iexaminer.org/kimsooja-a-needle-woman-piercing-the-fabric-of-life/>> [accessed 14 August 2021].

body is likened to a needle and her thread that healed the fragmented world and wanted to feel human interest and indifference, freedom and interference. Fabrics and needlework all extend beyond the meaning of everyday life to problems of relationships and communication with humans.

In most cases, her needlework is mentioned based on the female experience of connecting with her mother and grandmother and is used as an essential metaphor for works where needlework is not directly exposed.

Sewing is an art form that has been venting women's creative desires for a long time as a global emotion that transcends race, class and borders. Sewing is an act of self-expression dissolved in women's lives. It is a medium that reminds us of a mother's maternal love. Also, for women in the past, mothers educated their daughters and it was a life and art naturally rooted in their culture. In a patriarchal society, women also showed their creative potential through sewing methods. The activity of sewing will become a basis for understanding the overall world of Kimsooja's work through a discussion of femininity. The expression of femininity through sewing can be found in Kimsooja's work.

The needle no longer stays on the fabric or goes out of place and disappears. Instead, a trace of a thread remains and connects the trails of the needle to each other. If we think that there is an eye on the tip of a needle, then we can see through the eye. We can connect the appearances and meanings of different cultures. Kimsooja's body temporarily passes through the city, but her traces of video work still sew places, acting as a kind of thread. Based on Kimsooja's femininity, revealed through sewing, it can be found that she has an affectionate interest in humans and also has a healing character for the weak and wounded. This artist's attempt made a profound impression on my heart as an immigrant. In Kimsooja's work, differences in skin colour, language and occupation do not matter. Since we are all human, Kimsooja suggests the need to approach this discriminatory problem historically and structurally through her work. In other words, Kimsooja tries to weave people with needles.

[Conclusion]

Through her identity as an Asian woman, she travels around human relationships, nature and the world. Rather, the artist becomes a needle and needles the earth and the world. Her works escape from the Orientalism of passive and fragile images. Her expression method or concept is not meant to lower the traditional female image. Rather, she does her feminist performance by actively borrowing traditional images of women, expanding and elevating their meanings. Rather than fighting and acting against the outside world, Kimsooja becomes a needle that sews the world, picks up meaning within the artist and plays a role in understanding and converging everything within. Her work strategically breaks the boundaries between art genres. This can be interpreted as Kimsooja's work with the concept of embracing the surroundings rather than staying with the traditional female image.

'The Needle Woman' is a concept that forms the core of the work of locality that creates a difference between places. As such, they are connected and sewn together through the artist's body, which acts as a kind of needle, placing more weight on the connection rather than the difference. The figure anonymously presented through the artist's back represents the figure of this stranger thrown into another culture. At the same time, the viewer is immersed in the artist's position, leading to an experience that transcends the boundaries between self and others. In addition, the performance directly uses the female artist's body and implies questions about the identity of a woman of colour in an unfamiliar city. Especially after her performance, she erases her existence by disappearing without leaving a trace of where she once stood. Thus, 'The Needle Woman' exists as an anonymous person like the countless onlookers who passed by her.

What is unique about her work is that she shows art that transcends genres and boundaries, such as art and everyday life, painting and sculpture. She breaks down the edges of artistic life through everyday objects and shows the aesthetics of comfort and healing, reconciliation and tolerance.

The artist made a big impression on my mind as an immigrant. Whether Korean or Australian or different skin, colour, and languages were not a problem in her work. She presented the necessity of approaching these discriminatory problems of the world as historical and structural problems. She showed in her work that she makes an effort to weave the world and

people together with threads.

The journey of her work continues across borders, embracing the current cultural differences, immigrants, nomads, and marginalised minorities in society.

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