

BLACK BOX

Kimsooja

Interview with Associate Curator Kelly Gordon

April 2008

Kelly Gordon: What is your process when you make video works? Do you begin with notes, diagrams, sketches, or storyboarding? How much does it change on site?

Kimsooja: I basically refuse to “make” things, and I try to keep everything as it is and as natural as possible. My ideas are almost never written down or based on stories. For example, when I was trying to do a commissioned video performance for CCA Kitakyushu, I had in mind a walking performance but I wasn’t completely sure how to realize it in that particular environment. I walked around the city with the videographer for a couple of hours because I couldn’t find an idea for how to do the performance in that cityscape in relation to my body and spirit. Finally, when I arrived at a street in Shibuya, where hundreds of thousands of people were constantly passing through, like waves of a human ocean ebbing and flowing, I immediately understood the significance of my walking. I had a clear awareness of the contrast created between my body and the environment around me. It was a breathtaking moment. I had to stop and stand right there, remaining motionless against the flow of the people. I became like an axis, observing and contemplating the moment of people’s coming and going, weaving past my body as a medium, like a symbolic needle. This is the moment when the standing still performance that occurs in *A Needle Woman* first happened.

This is also how I worked for *A Laundry Woman - Yamuna River, India*. I stopped while passing by the Yamuna, next to a cremation facility, where all the debris was floating by. In that moment, I found the connection to the location and time within my spirit and body, and I immediately asked my videographer to start documenting my performance.

Usually the performance lasts a maximum of thirty minutes, as that is the threshold of how long I can keep my body still. By the time my body reaches its limit, and through intense focus on the relationship of the self and the other, I experience different stages of awareness and a new perception of my body and the world around me. For example, there was a moment during the *A Laundry Woman* performance when I was completely confused whether it was the river moving, or me. Then I came to the awareness that my concrete body was standing motionless but that, in another sense, it was also in motion and would burn to ash very soon.

KG: In several of your videos, including *A Laundry Woman - Yamuna River, India*, you appear with your back to the camera in a dark, featureless outfit, almost like a silhouette. Is this to suggest that you represent an “everywoman” character? Or a Sprecher figure, like those in Renaissance paintings who bear witness and offer authenticity to a scene? Do you draw from other literary or artistic inspirations? During the shoot, how do you retain the expression on your face that the viewer cannot see?

K: There have been interesting comparisons made between Casper David Friedrich's paintings and my performance videos, especially with *A Laundry Woman* and *A Needle Woman*. Actually, the Museum Folkwang in Germany exhibited my work next to Casper David Friedrich's paintings. As I turn my back towards the audience, my body functions as a void through which viewers can look and contemplate what I am gazing at, placing themselves in my position. Yet I still have to create a corporeal figure that witnesses, mediates, and contemplates on the here and now in each location.

I am not interested in showing my identity, but I can't imagine ever using a surrogate to replace me. The work should be performed with my own awareness of the energy of the location. If I were to substitute someone else, the figure would become empty, and would have no connection to this idea of the here and now. The most important aspect of my performance videos is what I experience within myself during the process. I actually don't care much about the resulting video piece, but when the experience is strong and special, the actual video seems to be strong and special too, so I just focus on the moment. To concentrate on the here and now I need inner silence and motionlessness. The performance comes from my awareness of other people or the river passing by rather than from my intention. I don't perform in order to make videos; rather, I make videos to document the moment of performance and my awareness.

Most audiences are curious about my facial expression while my back is turned. I don't want to show my face as it will draw people's attention to my identity rather than to what I am experiencing as an anonymous figure. My approach in making these videos is not to guide the audience in a specific direction but to leave the experience open. I do not borrow or reference things in my work. The pieces usually develop from my intuition, which is based on my experiences and the conditions of my life, rather than from logic. At the same time, I believe in the logic of intuition.

KG: Which comes first, the idea or the site? You have filmed all over the world but the sites often feel very similar and have a trance-inducing quality. Do these attributes inform how you select the sites? What is your technique for making the viewer feel vividly there—present with you?

K: I usually don't plan things in advance; I just let it happen—sometimes waiting, sometimes wandering around until the right moment arrives. It arrives when I feel the energy, accumulated from that precise time and place, in my body. Then I immediately start a performance. It is a temporary mobile temple that I establish. This only happens when I am ready and have been searching for some connection between my mind and body and a specific context of space, culture, geography, and the conditions of nature and human beings within a place. The whole process feels true to myself. The performances and videos seem to be vivid and engaging to the viewer as a result.

KG: Your video works suggest a timeless dimension on several levels. While the works typically have ambient or minimal sound, one can imagine a voice-over beginning with "Once upon a time...." Yet even the videos from ten years ago seem very current.

K: Your perception of my work with regards to the spectrum of time is interesting. It is true that it looks current but at the same time quite old. I think this is because through most of my work I've been pursuing a sense of universality that is timeless and fundamentally truth—general human experiences. The present tense is created through the presence of my body as it functions as a medium or a void, through which the audiences gaze, rather than as a static and iconic representation. I don't believe in creating something new but in inventing new perspectives based on mundane daily life as it relates to contemporary art.

KG: What are you working on now, and how is it like or unlike *A Laundry Woman - Yamuna River, India* and your other video works?

K: All my projects can look similar and at the same time be totally different. I've been working on a project called *Mumbai: A Laundry Field* since 2006, and am adding a couple more channels now. I've been to Mumbai again this year to film in another slum area where many people sleep on the streets, and I plan to go back this summer to film during the monsoon season. It is quite different from the other videos I've made so far, closer to a documentary format, without commentary but with edits. This piece brings together many of my previous practices relating to fabrics, the human body, and humanity, so it has a retrospective element to it.

Another piece I am working on now, *A Mirror Woman: The Sun & The Moon*, is a four-channel video I filmed in Goa. It shows the parallel relationship between the sun and the moon, overlapped on top of the ocean and its reflections. I also have a series of videos I've been working on since 2005, involving architectural cityscapes around the world, which I haven't been able to finish yet. Other than that, I have a few other site-specific architectural projects I am currently working on, including several in Europe.

I actually don't think about consistency and the pieces' relationship to my other work. I believe they must be related naturally in the larger scheme. I only focus on trying to break my own boundaries by constantly questioning and opening up new horizons.

KG: Your work often explores the physical and metaphorical aspects of materials and threads. What is the source of your fascination with textiles? How has this been manifest as your practice has evolved?

K: My fascination with fabric as a medium began when I was sewing a Korean bedspread with my mother in 1983. At this time I was questioning the "dimension of the surface on painting," and also searching for a methodology that could reveal the horizontal and vertical structure of the world in a way not yet examined in the history of painting. When I put a needle into the structure of the fabric, which has both a vertical and horizontal surface, I was thrilled and exhilarated, as if a ray of energy that seemed to come from the whole universe was penetrating through my body and my hands, and reaching to the needle point where it met the surface of the fabric. I was also interested in the fact that sewing layers on top of the structure of the fabric in a circular, performative way. This was the moment of my encounter with the yin and yang energy that has evolved in many different paths and levels in my practices.