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### **“Whose Utopia?” Kimsooja & Bottari Utopia**

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**“Whose Utopia?”**

**Kimsooja & Bottari Utopia**

By Younghee Kim Wait

A thesis submitted in conformity  
With the requirements for the  
Master’s Degree in Contemporary Art  
Sotheby’s Institute of Art

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## **Abstract**

### **“Whose Utopia?” Kimsooja & Bottari Utopia**

by Younghee Kim Wait

This thesis will explore the progressive evolution of utopia and utopianism in order to answer the question: “Whose utopia?” in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and its disproportionate impact on people who were already marginalized, disadvantaged, and discriminated against.

I will first review the writings of Sir Thomas More, Ernst Bloch, Michel Foucault, Edward Said, Owocki Enwezor, and Jose Estaban Muñoz tracing the progressive evolution of utopian ideals. I will then introduce and survey the artist, Kimsooja’s oeuvre in relation to salient features from my review of utopia’s progression, and gradually revealing her aesthetics of making as revealing utopian hope and creating what I have named “*Bottari* utopia” based on the metaphoric extension of her artistic vocabulary.

As chronicled in her numerous performances and videos, her concern is for persons not included, outcast, enduring violence... *Bottari* utopia bundles all: persons, places, things and time, in time, and is particularly inspiring, uplifting, and instructional today, as we (the world) find ourselves navigating isolation, and displacement, and face the fragility of life and uncertain future caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

I will then turn my attention to artist-activists and their import in transforming society for a better future, whether digital, virtual, or real.

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I would like to acknowledge the generous support of Dr. Eric Wolf without whose help many of the library resources would have not been available for my research during this COVID-19 pandemic. I thank Dr. Stephanie Jeanjean and Dr. Tracy Ann Essoglou for reading my paper and for their invaluable advice on grammar, editing and argument to shape this thesis to the very best of my ability.

## **Introduction**

2020-2021 has been an extraordinary year. Suddenly, the world was hit with the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing lockdowns forced the entire world to live under conditions of isolation and displacement from places of work, community, and unprecedented restrictions to travel and movement. Living with the loss of employment, loss of access to food and shelter, and their disintegrating impact on people's lives and social fabric, have further exposed inequity and injustice facing the minority communities and the marginalized in the USA. The pandemic experience reminds us that an upheaval caused by war, famine, environmental disasters, or a virus could put any of us in precarious conditions of living with anxiety and fear of an uncertain future. This fragility of life has led me to search for hope and inspirations. The inequities exposed by the pandemic in the art world, and the social and political protests in the USA from Black Lives Matter (BLM) to the Capital riots, have stimulated my interest with respect to contemporary artists whose work reflect the promises of utopianism, and at the same time to question, "Whose utopia?"

Artist Kimsooja has expressed this hope for a better future and addressed themes of exile and displacement in her work over the last three decades, and which seem particularly relevant today to all living the life of displacement. In this thesis, I shall investigate Kimsooja's oeuvre and her utopian aspirations to answer my question of, "Whose utopia?"

It cannot be ignored that the pandemic lock-down of museums, galleries, cultural venues have disproportionately affected artists and art professionals. Performance, exhibition, and cultural spaces are struggling to reinvent themselves, moving what they



can online, but long-term survival under the current economic situation is not tenable. Art professionals – especially, those self-employed – have been expunged as museums and galleries have let go of countless numbers of freelance art workers particularly those in public education programs and client service positions. Artists and art professionals have been protesting these inequities in the dismissal of “non-essential workers” as defined by the museum administrators and the fact that these firings disproportionately impact ethnic minorities. Also targeted, have been the activists who have been demanding diversity, equality, accessibility, and inclusion in museums’ collections, exhibitions, and hiring practices in the past, as their protests highlighted already untenable racial and gender biases, cultural hierarchy, inequitable allocation of resources and economic benefits perpetuated by museums and other cultural institutions.

On the other hand, pressured by the Black Lives Matter movement’s anti-racism outcry over the death of George Floyd in May 2020, many institutions announced renewed commitments to diversity, equity, and socially sustainable practices in their collections, exhibitions, education programs and hiring practices. Many museums have responded to media and social pressure by announcing the commissioning of works by white women, artists of color, and LGBTQ, as well as putting on targeted exhibitions and creating public outreach programs on their virtual platforms. The commercial art market also declared their commitment to promoting under-valued women artists, artists of ethnic minorities, and LGBTQ artists on their digital platforms and at auction. These commitments seem socially insignificant and insufficient given the exponential surge in hate crimes and racial violence. Violent attacks on Asian-Americans who are being blamed for the “Chinese-Virus” and the prolonged distress of economic insecurity further

expose the fragile social tenets of democracy, freedom, equality, and justice in the USA. Instead of social progress, 2020-21 feels like the antithesis of Utopian hope and aspiration.

While the cause and conditions of pandemic displacement experienced in the USA (and other advantaged nations) and those living as global refugees are incomparable in their magnitude and severity, the COVID-19 crisis has delivered upon us the opportunity to sense and experience some of what it means to be dislocated, literally and metaphorically, with little or no control, or end in sight.

Sir Thomas More (1478-1535) first introduced the term and concept of Utopia as an ideal for creating a perfect Republic in his book *Utopia* in 1516.<sup>1</sup> Subsequently, Utopianism has inspired a great number of writers, and philosophers such as Ernst Bloch, Michel Foucault, Edward Said, Okwui Enwezor, and Jose Estaban Muñoz. Their works have progressively pushed the boundaries of utopia from a place for only chosen people to one that includes “Orientals,” “Africans,” and “Queers.” Their works have challenged the dominant relationship between power and knowledge and their perpetuating impact on political and social inequity and injustice as experienced by minorities while inspiring artists to engage with evolving utopian themes, contemporary political and social concerns and search for meaningful ways to effect the transformation of society outside the institutional walls, whether by leading or participating in protests or with innovative ways to communicate and engage directly with the general public and the collectors.

Of the visual artists whose works have addressed the themes of utopia, exile, migration, and displacement, such as Ai Weiwei, Yoko Ono, Joan Jonas, Olafur Eliasson,

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas More, *Utopia*, Project Gutenberg eBook, ed. Henly Morley released on April 22, 2005, (Hereafter, More, *Utopia*.) <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2130/2130-h/2130-h.htm>.

Christophe Büchele, Hew Locke, Dahn Vö, and Kimsooja and countless others, I have chosen to focus on Kimsooja because she is less well known among collectors in the United States. Kimsooja's works reference the utopianism of Bloch, Foucault, Said, Enwezor, and Muñoz. At the same time, her works express a departure from their ideals and reposition Utopia in the context of Buddhist philosophy of 'merging' oneself with others. Her works are not centered around her own identity. Rather, her social art practice investigates utopia and utopianism in terms that are distinct from those of ideas of selfhood. Her utopianism is informed by the teachings and spirituality of Zen Buddhism of seeing oneself in others which seems to better represent and respond to the contemporary aesthetics of artists who are responding to global political and human conditions of exile and displacement.

In order to answer my question of "Whose utopia?" I will review the work of Sir Thomas More, Ernst Bloch, Michel Foucault, Edward Said, Owkui Enwezor, and Jose Estaban Muñoz in the first chapter. In the second chapter, I will introduce Kimsooja's work and her more expansive conceptualization of utopia and utopianism as grounded in Zen Buddhism and philosophy. I have called her spiritual utopian aspiration: *Bottari utopia* -- named after the traditional Korean cloth-wrapped bundles that are one of the primary elements of her artistic vocabulary.

In Korea, people bundle up their essential possessions in bottaris for moving or leaving, and for a travel or flight. As a Korean Immigrant to the United States, I am familiar with the cultural signifier, and complexity of unspoken emotional charge Bottari conjures, both positive and negative. In Kimsooja's artistic practice, Bottari is extended to any container and to the idea of containment itself as a conceptual bundle enveloping

humanity and the human condition. In her hands, the traditional bottari becomes a transformative and inclusive tapestry of people, lives and circumstances, downplaying the divisions and hierarchies of beliefs, religion, politics, gender, sexuality, cultural, ethnic, linguistic difference or economic status. In the process of making her *Bottari* conceptual, she embraces and even advocates hope, commonality, and the resilience of people despite the fragile conditions of their lives. She brings the ambiguity of protection, rejection and isolation implied in the physical *Bottari* to ‘wrapping and unwrapping’ universal *Bottari* of humanity, presents critical perspectives on current conditions of humanity. Her works inform our experience of the COVID-19 pandemic within the larger context of political and social conditions of global refugees who are suspended indefinitely in isolated camps and not able to choose their final destiny or new home. Her works and aspirations may help us to bridge seeing inequity, injustice, and above all, indifference as a common cause of sufferings.

By means of this research into utopia, and the reflection and revelations emerging from my study of Kimsooja's art, I hope to shed light on art and artists' role in the transformation of society for a better future.

## Chapter 1. Utopia and Utopianism

In this chapter, I shall investigate the chronological progression of utopianism by Sir Thomas More, Ernst Bloch, Michel Foucault, Edward Said, Okwui Enwezor, and Jose Estaban Muñoz. Kimsooja's work is referenced in the context of these successive developments as I investigate my question of "Whose utopia?"

### Sir Thomas More (1478-1535)

"Utopia: an ideal commonwealth whose inhabitants exist under seemingly perfect conditions. Hence *utopian* and *utopianism* are words used to denote visionary reform that tends to be impossibly idealistic... The word first occurred in Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*, published in Latin as *Libellus...de Optimo Reipublicae Statu, Deque Nova Insula Utopia* (1516; "Concerning the Highest State of the Republic and the New Island Utopia")."<sup>2</sup>

Since Sir Thomas More first introduced Utopia as an ideal for a perfect republic in his book *Utopia* in 1516, utopianism has inspired artists, writers and philosophers over the centuries. Communes, religious cults, and experimentation with Marxism followed utopian ideals. It has fueled people's imaginations and hope for a place where one would live under "perfect" conditions. We cannot however, ignore the irony reflected in the origin of its Greek root- Ou (Not) and Topos (Place) meaning "no-Place". More referred to it as "Nusquama," Latin for noplac.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Utopia is often confused with a Greek origin of eu-topos, a good place.

The central idea of More's imaginary Utopia is to create an alternative to the established order, where communal ownership of properties, the cultivation of the mind,

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<sup>2</sup> "Utopia," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, October 22, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/utopia>.

<sup>3</sup> Dominic Baker-Smith, "Thomas More," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/thomas-more/>.

equal participation of work by men and women, and time for intellectual pursuit and cultural life for every person is possible. Each child is to be educated in liberal arts, and humanist values are placed in the center of a fulfilling life -- not material gains.

Utopianism discouraged acting against common good. More was critical of abuses by the ruling class and the Church of England.<sup>4</sup> More wrote *Utopia* during the time of King Henry VIII when the king initiated the English Reformation, rejecting papal authority, and separated the Church of England from the Catholic Church. More was opposed to the King and eventually beheaded for treason. He was celebrated as a model of integrity by other European scholars of his time for resisting the tyranny of the King.

“I cannot think that a nation can be governed either just or happily: not justly, because the best things will fall to the share of the worst men; nor happily, because all things will be divided among a few (and even these are not in all respects happy), the rest being left to be absolutely miserable. Therefore, when I reflect on the wise and good constitution of the Utopians, among whom all things are so well governed and with so few laws, where virtue hath its due reward, and yet there is such an equality that every man lives in plenty.”<sup>5</sup>

More argued for equitable justice in common law practice and for the constitutions of his Utopia making equality in governance available to all men [sic] as a foundation for achieving the "just" and "happy" life. Realigning power relationships between the state, church, and people underlies his Utopia: The Republic was still responsible for delivering the perfect condition for just and happy life, and those who broke the rules were punished. The establishment of penal colonies such as Australia or sending indentured servants to America exemplify the separation of good and bad, and punishment through segregation as conceived of at the time.

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<sup>4</sup> Baker-Smith, "Thomas More."

<sup>5</sup> More, *Utopia*.

Dr. Aliza Schwartz has pointed out that although this Utopia promoted communal property ownership, it allowed two slaves for each household.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the 16<sup>th</sup> century English Utopia excluded slaves as people entitled to the benefits of utopianism, as slaves were not considered humans capable of developing intellectual and cultural life. Unimaginable today we may say, but if we reflect on the protests of BLM, police brutality, and the disproportionate share of the US prison population, such contradictions whether they are explicitly stated in 16<sup>th</sup> century writings or silently perpetuated by some today, makes me question, Whose utopia? Indeed, Ernst Bloch was critical of this enclosed, isolated island of Utopia, and of this unrealistic perfect constitution that remained as an ideal dream and proposed a new way of approaching utopia.

### **Ernst Bloch (1885-1977)**

Ernst Bloch was a German-Jewish Marxist philosopher. He published three volumes entitled *The Principle of Hope* in 1954, 1955 and 1959. He broadly explored utopianism and utopian impulses presented in Western art, literature, religion, and other forms of cultural expression. He positioned the function of utopia as a relevant and positive concept for the transformation of society. For him utopia was an expression of hope for a transformed future and acting on that hope as a catalyst for better decision-making. Bloch differentiated this “concrete utopia,” from More's more fantastic one and called for an “anticipatory not compensatory” hope committed to a willful thinking of

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<sup>6</sup> Aliza Schwartz, "Critical Utopianism, Whitney Lecture," SoundCloud audio, time mark 21:13 (from 1:09:49total length,) December 2, 2017, Accessed March 16, 2021, <https://soundcloud.com/aliza-shvarts/critical-utopianism-whitney-lecture/s-AL7CRjTGBDf>.

transformation rather than a wishful thinking.<sup>7</sup> He rejected the abstract utopia that remained a fantasy in a novel of the past, and instead emphasized the emancipation of human consciousness to reject fear and nihilism. The anticipated future of what might become and not just what was already here underlies his hope for the future because the world was not yet finished, but in the process of becoming. Bloch's intention was to teach humanity this hope, what Ruth Levitas has called: an "educated hope."<sup>8</sup>

"The Not-Yet-Conscious itself must become conscious in its act, known in its content, as the process of dawning on the one hand, as what is dawning on the other. And so the point is reached where hope itself, this authentic expectant emotion in the forward dream, no longer just appears as a merely self-based mental feeling... but in a conscious-known way as utopian function."<sup>9</sup>

This anticipatory consciousness is latent within persons; "Not-Yet-Conscious" and "Not-Yet-Come-Into-Being," are central to the Bloch's idea of humanity's future. For Bloch, the utopia is where this Not-Yet-Conscious makes its appearance as the birth of new being.<sup>10</sup>

In his "Man as Possibility," Bloch challenged facts as man-made and therefore changeable and be otherwise.<sup>11</sup> Bloch called on universities not to preserve their old traditions for their own glory, but to bring light for the future of society. Bloch demanded that men must act as catalysts to have something to look forward to in this life rather than wait for heaven above after death. Bloch's intellectual openness toward the future, his belief in the potential of the emancipation of consciousness to power political actions, and the transformative role of art in the evolution of the not-yet-being inspired 20<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ruth Levitas, "Educated Hope: Ernst Bloch on Abstract and Concrete Utopia," *Utopian Studies* 1, no. 2 (1990): pg. 15, Accessed March 16, 2021, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20718998>.

<sup>8</sup> Levitas, "Educated Hope," pg. 17

<sup>9</sup> Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1995), pg. 144.

<sup>10</sup> Ernest Bloch, Ernst Bloch and William R. White. "MAN AS POSSIBILITY," *CrossCurrents* 18, no. 3 (1968): pg.281, Accessed March 16, 2021, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24457267>.

<sup>11</sup> Bloch, Bloch and White, "MAN AS POSSIBILITY," pg. 274.



century activists and artists once again to pursue utopia as a possible destination, a potential to be decidedly different from the past. Performance scholar, cultural and queer theorist Jose Estaban Muñoz specifically refers to Bloch's futurity in his "ideality" of queerness and to an "educated" mode of desiring.<sup>12</sup>

Consider Bloch's positive utopian ideals in the context of: two terribly destructive World Wars, Nazi concentration camps, targeted killings of those in the "wrong" category of religion, race, sexual-orientation, or physical and mental capacity. Bloch himself survived exiles in Vienna, Paris, Prague and in the USA, during the Nazi regime in Germany, before returning to East Germany under Soviet communism until he took a political asylum in West Germany in 1961. Given his own intense sojourn, his positive belief in the potential of humanity and emerging consciousness must have been a powerful inspiration and source of hope for those who were living their own wanderings, surviving their own displacement and searching for answers post World War II.<sup>13</sup>

However, his utopia seems limited to intellectuals and those who can be educated to learn this hope. Whether it was the Enlightenment that valued reason, or Existentialism that valued the actualization of individuals, Bloch's propositions seemed limited to those of the educated class and did not extend to the rest, reigniting my concern and query: "Whose utopia?"

The artist, Kimsooja also grew up in postwar conditions -- Korea right after the Korean war (1950-1953) -- which tore apart the fabric of Korean society, resulting in

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<sup>12</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, 10th ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2019), Pg. 1-3.

<sup>13</sup> Richard H Roberts, "AN INTRODUCTORY READING OF ERNST BLOCH'S "THE PRINCIPLE OF HOPE," " *Literature and Theology* 1, no. 1 (1987): 89-112, Accessed March 16, 2021, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23925188>.

terrible living conditions for the Koreans of her parents' generations as well as for many of her own generation until well into the late 60's. Her experience of growing up in the difficult conditions of post-war Korea sensitized and have contributed enormously to her empathy for others affected by war, and can be seen as significant themes in her artistic works. Michel Foucault takes Bloch's idea of having something to look forward to in this life and introduces the idea of heterotopias.

### **Michel Foucault (1926-1984)**

Michel Foucault was a French philosopher, political activist, and literary critic. His writings addressed the relationship between the power and knowledge, how they were used in constructing truth and normalcy, and their function as social control. He contested the dominant ideology of truth, and rejected social, intellectual, and religious bias and hierarchy in his writings. Like Bloch, Foucault disputed the absoluteness, or solidity of facts; arguing that information, knowledge and truth values were conditional, in flux, changeable and subject to context-historical, socio-cultural, political, temporal and spatial. Foucault lectured in several American universities in the late '70's and early 80's on the modalities and practices of objectification of human beings toward other human beings. He saw the punishment of *undesirable* people in prisons, mental institutions, schools, and hospitals for reasons of race, education, gender, and sexual orientation as rationalizations of violence against individuals by institutions in power.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Michel Foucault. "The Subject and Power." *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (1982): pg. 777-78. Accessed March 16, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343197>.

He emphasized the necessity of self-realization to counter such political and social power via these means of classifying, punishing and or controlling individuals.<sup>15</sup> Foucault lived and taught in France, Sweden, Poland, Germany, and Tunis, and spent time in Iran, Japan, and the USA. He died from AIDs in 1984. His views on power and knowledge, meaning and truth, were probably the result of witnessing and comparing power dynamics and cultural differences in many countries and from his experience of being a gay man. Foucault's writings and lectures inspired political activists in America, especially those marginalized, to challenge dominant power structures, hierarchy and social conditions that defined, defended, established or facilitated all forms of discrimination.

Foucault proposed the concept of heterotopias (hétérotopie), a literary topos, as a differentiated 'sites' to prior conceptualizations of utopia for those who were subjected to deformative classifications. Anthony Vidler summarizes Foucault's intentions and motivations:

“‘heterotopias’ ... are more troubling ‘because they secretly undermine language’, blocking the possibility of giving a name at once to ‘this and that’, shattering and intertwining common names and, above all, destroying the very logic of syntax: ‘not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things to ‘hold together’”<sup>16</sup>

Foucault's concept of heterotopias is pivotal to his critique of power, and in creating challenge and resistance to the restrictive and exclusionary social norms and knowledge as found in and exercised by dominant and dominating cultural institutions. Foucault

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<sup>15</sup> Millicent Dillon and Michel Foucault, "Conversation with Michel Foucault," *The Threepenny Review*, no. 1 (1980): pg. 4, Accessed March 16, 2021, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4382926>.

<sup>16</sup> Anthony Vidler, Michel Foucault, and Pamela Johnston, "Heterotopias," *AA Files*, no. 69 (2014): pg. 18, (Here after, Foucault, "Heterotopias") Accessed March 16, 2021, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43202545>.

further explained that heterotopias was a “discursive space,” an “incompatible, challenging, and transforming space where existing spaces were contested, and inverted.”<sup>17</sup> He encouraged self-realization and struggle against institutional power as a tactic against the violence of rationalization of punishment for being different from the norm. Edward Said expands Foucault’s heterotopias to counter the colonialism which defined “Orientalism.”

### **Edward Said (1935-2003)**

The Post-Colonial discourses of Edward Said add another dimension to contemporary utopianism. In his book *Orientalism*, Said carefully charted out the inception and creation of the “Orient” as an invention of dominant colonial powers. He argued that the Orient was not only a romantic and exotic place for the Europeans of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century but also a place of the richest and oldest colonies, the source of European civilizations and languages, and an integral part of European civilization and material culture.<sup>18</sup> Said laid out how intellectual colonialism was used in the creation and perpetuation of a romantic but inferior classification of “the other”; who was seen to be incapable of self-governance and thus, required teaching, domination and direction. Furthermore, these ideological justifications became the foundation for Western colonialism establishing master-slave relationships and implied dependency between the West and its colonies. Orientalism has perpetuated racial and cultural bias, legitimized European supremacy, and promoted policies that still dominate world politics and Western intellectual and cultural institutions today. To view Said in relation to Foucault’s

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<sup>17</sup> Foucault, “Heterotopias,” p 20.

<sup>18</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (Princeton, NJ: Vintage Books Edition, 1979), pg. 1-4.

critique of power and knowledge, and claims to truth is to understand the ontology of Orientalism and Colonialism. Post-colonial studies are an important catalyst for today's discourses on "decolonize museums" movement. Said also recognized that "each age and society re-create its 'others.' Far from a static thing, identity of self or of 'other' is a much worked-over historical, social, intellectual, and political process... in all societies."<sup>19</sup> Okwui Enwezor expands the colonialism of the Orientalism to that of African continent as well as to the treatment of arts of the Non-Western countries as inferior and "primitive."

### **Okwui Enwezor (1963-2019)**

In a similar vein to that of Said, Okwui Enwezor examines how Africa's rich natural resources taken by the Western colonial powers and the forced exportation of slave labor from Africa fueled the industrialization of the West, and how Western appropriation of primitive African arts grounded the modern arts movement of late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe. Enwezor was not a trained art historian or curator. He wrote about art with an outsider's critical eyes. He highlighted the absence of artists from Africa and non-European countries in the art scenes of New York City. For the museum curators, dealers, and collectors, Enwezor identified African artists whose works responded to the current conditions of the continent and the lasting impact of colonial history as an important aspect of today's global political and artistic discourse and under-recognized reality.

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<sup>19</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, pg. 332.

Enwezor's 2002 exhibition "The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945-1994," at the MOMA PS1, provided a groundbreaking overview of the cultural conditions in postcolonial Africa, and his artistic directorship for documenta 11 were turning points in terms of access for non-European contemporary artists as well as in terms of expanding the discourse on contemporary art in the proliferation of biennials in non-European cities.<sup>20</sup> For documenta 11 which was the first post-colonial documenta, Enwezor pushed for global perspective and elevated artists from non-European countries onto the same global platform. Documenta 11 was the first to present interdisciplinary themes on four continents for a period of year prior to opening in Kassel, Germany in order to stimulate the global conversation on the theme "Art is the production of knowledge." This multiple continental hosting of documenta 11 was an expression of Enwezor's argument for multiple centers of Modernity simultaneously existing on different continents as espoused in his "Modernity and Postcolonial Ambivalence."<sup>21</sup>

Enwezor argued there was no hierarchy, no superiority of one modernity over another modernity, but simply, that different trajectories of modernity exist simultaneously; each unique in their response to local conditions and history. He argued that regardless of their locality, artists were engaged in the progress of making their own future of possibilities in their refusal of monoculturalism.<sup>22</sup> Enwezor challenged the persistent colonialism that infected the art world. He brought critical review to museum

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<sup>20</sup> Celestine Bohlen, "A Global Vision for a Global Show; Documenta Curator Sees Art As Expression Of Social Change," New York Times, February 12, 2002, <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/02/12/arts/global-vision-for-global-show-documenta-curator-sees-art-expression-social.html>.

<sup>21</sup> "documenta11 8 June – 15 September 2002 Platform 5: Exhibition," documenta, Accessed March 17, 2021, <https://www.documenta.de/en/retrospective/documenta11>.

<sup>22</sup> Okwui Enwezor, "Modernity and Postcolonial Ambivalence," *Altermodern*, ed. Nicholas Bourriaud, n.d., (London, United Kingdom: Tate Publishing, 2009), pg. 602

collections and exhibitions. His critique was the impetus for many curators and collectors to pay attention to not only African artists but to other minority men and women artists missing from collections. Without Enwezor it might have taken much longer for museums to change their criteria for both collecting, and for exhibiting important contemporary African artists, other artists of color, and women artists.

The current exhibition at the New Museum “*Grief and Grievance*” (February 17 - June 6, 2021), honoring Okwui Enwezor, speaks volumes on racial injustice and the destabilizing effects of racism and inequity on Black community, and amplifies the importance of BLM in the context of the pandemic.<sup>23</sup> Jose Estaban Muñoz expands Said's and Enwezor's challenges to Western cultural domination to the conditions of the Queer community, and into the discourse of intersectionality.

### **Jose Estaban Muñoz (1967-2013)**

Jose Estaban Muñoz was a Cuban-American scholar of performance studies, and a cultural and queer theorist who explored many of Foucault's ideas, especially those investigating the relationship between power and objectification. He also subscribed to Bloch's envisioning of the futurity of utopia in his book, *Cruising Utopia, The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. For Muñoz, the futurity of Queerness was also an as "yet-to-arrive," while queerness of the then current socio-political reality was “Not-Yet-Queer.”<sup>24</sup> Bloch's belief that humans possessed an anticipatory consciousness which gave them not-yet-conscious knowledge of future possibilities, was central to Muñoz' futurity of

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<sup>23</sup> “Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America,” New Museum, Accessed March 16, 2021. <https://www.newmuseum.org/exhibitions/view/grief-and-grievance-art-and-mourning-in-america-1>.

<sup>24</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, Pg. 8.

Queerness and a role of ‘educated desiring.’ Muñoz investigated the aesthetics of being Queer and queer belonging. His journey as a Cuban American-catholic-queer-middle class-scholar, and his resistance to the multiple exclusions his long-hyphenated identity implies, coupled with his hope for a different political-socio-cultural futurity encouraged many to reflect upon their own intersectional complexity and to examine the challenges of living in today’s identity politics.

Professor Gayatri Gopinath, the director of New York University Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality, in her review of Muñoz’ *Cruising Utopia* reminds us that in Muñoz’s earlier book *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Muñoz is quoted as saying:

“disidentificatory performances and reading requires an active kernel of utopian possibility. Although utopianism has become the bad object of much contemporary political thinking, we nonetheless need to hold on to and even risk utopianism if we are to engage in the labor of making a queer world.”<sup>25</sup>

In his lectures, Foucault referred to such performance as a method of “refusal to submit” and “freedom’s choice.”<sup>26</sup> Muñoz highlighted Foucault’s idea of heterotopias, as “places that are opposed to all others, that are destined in some way to efface them, to neutralize them or to purify them.”<sup>27</sup>

Reclaiming the agency of self, and creating ambiguity for the audience as a strategy to dislocate the discriminatory classifications have been an important genre for feminist and minority artists whose work engages intersectionality. It has also greatly

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<sup>25</sup> Gayatri Gopinath, "The Utopian in the Everyday," Social Text Journal Online, June 25, 2010, [https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope\\_article/the\\_utoipan\\_in\\_the\\_everyday\\_a\\_response\\_to\\_jose\\_esteban\\_munozs\\_cruising\\_utopia\\_the\\_there\\_and\\_then\\_of/](https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/the_utoipan_in_the_everyday_a_response_to_jose_esteban_munozs_cruising_utopia_the_there_and_then_of/).

<sup>26</sup> Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” pg. 790.

<sup>27</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, Pg. 7.



enhanced the relevance of performance arts in social and political discourse. In the subsequent chapter, I will argue that similarly, Kimsooja's work presents an alternative method of disidentificatory resistance as she intentionally removes the presence of self-identity from her work and instead provides platforms for the audience to become the performers.

Scholars and critics such as Said, Enwezor, and Muñoz challenged established intellectual bias resulting from the colonial past, and paved the way for greater visibility and relevance of minority artists and scholars. Rather than pushing for dismantling colonialism, many mainstream Western cultural institutions and universities have continued to endorse the fortress of intellectual bias by marginalizing the minorities, women, Indigenous people, and LGBTQ populations. Black American Studies, Ethnic Studies, Feminist Studies, Native American Studies, etc., have been offered as courses one can take in universities, but the representation of women and minorities in the leadership and administration of these universities remains low. This same low representation occurs at cultural institutions. Occasional celebrations, collections, commissions, high-lighted exhibitions and programming of "the others" have a short history and an uncertain future given the tendency of power to re-establish itself and its prerogatives, and for memory to be often at the mercy of that which is *pleasing*. Thus, the participation of artists, and their activism is ever more important in the continued push for achieving intellectual and social equality and justice.

We can contemplate the evolving utopia and utopianism from its initial phase as the domain of a state's institutional responsibility during More's time, to the second phase utopian ideals of Enlightenment and Existentialism centered around European

intellectuals of 19<sup>th</sup> Century and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century as expressed by philosophers like Bloch and Marxist Socialism; moving then to a third phase of liberation of selfhood from colonialism and subjecthood of individuals as interrogated by Foucault, Said, Enwezor, and Muñoz: followed by a fourth and current stage of contemporary concerns extending utopianism beyond selfhood to humanity taken as a whole, expressed in Kimsooja's utopian ideals. This fourth phase of spiritual utopianism extends utopia to the invisible and the forgotten, to global refugees with no places of their own.

Kimsooja is an example of one contemporary artist addressing the post-colonial concerns of “the other” and at the same time working from the perspective of non-judgmental acceptance and empathy for others which is emerging from the philosophy of Zen-Buddhism.<sup>28</sup> I will now review her work from this context of spiritual utopianism, which I had named a *Bottari* utopia in my introduction.

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<sup>28</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, “Nicholas Bourriaud and Kimsooja: Interview” from the Exhibition Catalogue, *Kim Sooja: Conditions of Humanity*. Lyon, France: Musée d'art contemporain, 2003, Pg. 45.

## **Chapter 2. Kimsooja**

### **Brief Introduction and Aesthetics of Kimsooja**

Kimsooja was born in Korea in 1957 and trained as a painter at the Hongik University art school in Seoul, Korea. She made a deliberate and explicit decision to write her name (Kim Soo-Ja) as one unified word without differentiating last and first name beginning 2003. This act in itself gives insight into what has come to follow: claiming her own identity independent to social norms and limitations of assigned gender, marital status, and the culturally-imposed hierarchical position of her name in Korean. In my conversation with Kimsooja in March 2021, the artist stated that she considered herself as a ‘hermaphrodite’: composed of the duality of male and female, containing both yin and yang energies within herself.

The art works I have selected to examine here are ones I have seen, witnessed and experienced first-hand. Other works I viewed online but have not seen in person, I discussed with the artist and her assistant in my interviews and correspondence with them. My source materials are derived mainly from the artist’s own website, her interviews with curators, her artist statements, publications on her exhibitions as well as my own accumulated knowledge of her work having followed her over the past twenty years. Kimsooja has further clarified and confirmed my interpretation of her works and her philosophical foundations through interviews and emails in February and March 2021.

Kimsooja was brought up in a Catholic family but acknowledges a strong influence of Confucianism that governs hierarchy in relationships, moral duties and obligations among different classes of people according to their gender, age, and social

position in Korean culture. Korean language strongly reflects these embedded vertical relations and the superiority of male, and older persons. Buddhism and Shamanism have equally influenced the traditional rituals and belief systems of the Korean people.

Kimsooja identifies most closely with Zen Buddhism. Its teachings of the impermanence of life and accepting the duality in all things have shaped her personal ethos and her artistic practice.

“Totality of Art and Life,” “Disappearing” into her work,” “Non-Doing,” and “Non-Making” are phrases she uses repeatedly when she speaks of her work. It is from my investigation of these phrases, coupled with my having had the opportunity to discuss them with her, that I have come to appreciate the Zen spirituality and her own philosophy of accepting duality in all matters in her works. The void, nothingness, undoing, emptying of herself has been a lifelong quest. Thus, ‘disappearing into her work’ is a literal spiritual goal, not just an artistic ambition.<sup>29</sup>

For Kimsooja, the *Totality of Art and Life* means the merging of life and art, seeing and using her own body as source material and medium, and embracing the duality of life (yin and yang energies, life and death, male and female). Balance and harmony in duality are essential to her Eastern Philosophy. Three elements consistently connect her body of work:

- I) a wrapped bundle, or “Bottari” that functions as a kind of a container,
- II) a “needle” that weaves and connects the presence and absence within the Bottari,

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<sup>29</sup> Gerald Matt, “Interview,” 2002, Accessed March 16, 2021, <http://www.kimsooja.com/texts/matt.html>.

III) the “Obangsaek” colors that symbolizes the five directional and natural elements of the universe.

These three elements form her unique artistic vocabulary through which she conveys her utopian aspirations and her vision of the totality of art and life. The symbolic Obangsaek consists of the five traditional Korean elemental colors representing the harmony of directional orientation of the universe, the natural elements of earth, and their metaphoric energy. For example, blue represents the East and Wood element, Red represents the South and Fire element, Yellow the center and the Earth element, White the West and Metal element, and Black represents the North and Water element.<sup>30</sup> These Obangsaek colors are used to decorate Korean traditional festive clothing, food and architectural elements symbolizing the balance of universal energy and harmony. Obangsaek symbolically renders a reference to the environment and locates where those wrapped memories took place, indexing a non-material physicality for Kimsooja.

By expanding the conceptual and metaphoric significance of the three elements -- the Bottari, Needle, and Obangsaek -- Kimsooja creates a profound body of work that probes the state of humanity in its current political and social state, and explores human relationships within these conditions. For example, she places worn clothes in her Bottari bundle. She does not see it as a recycling of old fabrics but as relics of the presence of persons who wore those clothes -- their memories, smell, their stories, and their absence remaining in their worn clothing. Her works are visual metaphors of a temporal history which connect past, present and future. She references anthropological and cultural history as signified in and by the contents. She reifies the ephemera of lived lives in them.

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<sup>30</sup> Jang Soo-Hyun, "Korean Traditional Colors," NEWS-H, Last modified October 10, 2016, <http://www.newshyu.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=32143>.

The result is an artwork that encompasses persons, locations, and conditions of the time and the myriad dimensions of life bundled. Life as it is, not as a tableau.

In her 1997 interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, Kimsooja talked about her experience of sewing with her mother, specifically, how excited she was when she realized that a needle and thread freed her from the two-dimensionality of canvas and enabled her to work with multiple dimensions at the same time. For her the needle functioned as both female and male energy: the feminine, the eye of the needle receiving a thread and the needle point, the masculine, penetrating the fabrics; bringing the yin and yang of complete energy. When her grandmother died, she saved her grandmother's old Korean dresses and began creating fabric works with them. She discovered that the clothes held much more meaning to her than just as old fabrics to be recycled; they contained the memories and the presence of her grandmother, and the absence of her now. She realized art could embody "memory of space, time and personage" by simply using used clothing in her work.<sup>31</sup> By choosing traditionally feminine materials of sewing, weaving, and working with textiles, Kimsooja created more challenging conditions for herself in Korea. These so-called *domestic* women's works were not considered "Fine Arts" by her contemporaries or by galleries, but she was committed to elevating them as an art form and accepted not being a part of the commercial art market.

Her earlier pieces from the *Sewn Works* series (1983-1992), embody her struggle to reconcile the Confucian values of Korean society toward the role of woman with the

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<sup>31</sup> Hans Ulrich, Obrist. "Wrapping bodies and souls," 1997, Accessed March 16, 2021, [http://www.kimsooja.com/texts/ulrich\\_97.html](http://www.kimsooja.com/texts/ulrich_97.html).

expectations she imposed on herself as an artist.<sup>32</sup> Her break came when she was selected for the Artist Residency program at the MoMA PS1 by winning the nomination of the Korean Arts and Cultural foundation sponsorship in 1992-1993. Living and working with international artists, sharing and exchanging artistic ideas during her residency propelled her growth as an artist. She had a personal breakthrough and found what was to become her artistic vocabulary.

It was in the 1992 MoMA PS1 open studio to public held during her residency, that she first presented a *Bottari*: bundle of used clothes simply wrapped and tied with a colorful used Korean wedding bed cover. There she found her “deductive object” that was an object, a three-dimensional painting, a sculpture and installation all at once.<sup>33</sup> She did not fabricate the object. She created her *Bottari* by wrapping used clothes inside a used bedcover and tying the corners of the wrapped fabric together. This “non-making” and “non-doing” became important practice for her as she chose to retain the original source material in its own original condition with its own history and markings intact.<sup>34</sup> *Bottari*, a bundle that can contain the rich memory of space, time, and personage elevated her work to a different conceptual level. *Bottari* led her to connect its meaning and metaphor beyond her personal life; they became a visual signifier of migration, displacement, and conditions of humanity, especially refugees.

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<sup>32</sup> Daina Augaitis, “Kimsooja: Ways of Being, A conversation between Daina Augaitis and Kimsooja,” 2004, Accessed March 16, 2021, [http://www.kimsooja.com/texts/diana\\_augaitis\\_2014.html](http://www.kimsooja.com/texts/diana_augaitis_2014.html).

<sup>33</sup> Park Young Taik, “From Planes to Three Dimensions: A Bundle,” 1996, Accessed March 16, 2021, [http://kimsooja.com/texts/Park%20Young%20Taik\\_1996.html](http://kimsooja.com/texts/Park%20Young%20Taik_1996.html).

<sup>34</sup> Matt, “Interview.”

After experiencing her artistic growth during the MoMA PS1 residency, she could not find similar support and opportunities in Korea, resulting in her eventually leaving Korea and immigrating to New York City in the late 90's. After her move to New York, she began traveling around the world to make and exhibit her works living a nomadic life. These three elements, taken with the concept of Totality of Art and life, and embracing the yin and yang duality inherent in life have been the foundation of her aesthetics and philosophy in expressing her version of utopianism, specifically in relationship to the themes of exile, displacement, and not-*belonging*.

“*Bottari* is time. a personified abstraction. *Bottari* is an abstraction of a personage, an abstraction of society and history, and that of time and memory. It is past, present, and future.”— Kimsooja, Interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, 1998.<sup>35</sup>

### ***Cities on the Move, 2727 KM Bottari Truck, (1997)***

My first encounter with Kimsooja's work was a photo still from the *Cities on the Move, 2727 km Bottari Truck, (1997)*, twenty years ago. A woman sits on the piles of colorful bundles of *Bottari* looking out to the horizon with her back facing us. The contrast between the colorful *Bottari* and the woman's simple black traveling outfit is stark. It evokes romantic feelings at first, but the sense of loneliness and the vulnerability of the woman's back exposed to the elements and dangers of the road are unsettling. Neither her past nor her future seem to offer any protection. I felt an affinity to the woman seated on the *Bottari*, as if it were my own portrait. Having moved often as a child and having immigrated with all our possessions packed and bundled to New York

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<sup>35</sup> Obrist, “Wrapping bodies and souls.”



City, I felt my loneliness and displacement shared by the woman, the artist in the photograph.

Initially, Kimsooja used Korean wedding bed covers exclusively to wrap the *Bottari* in her early works. These wedding bed covers were embroidered with words of good fortune, happiness, and longevity, and with symbolic flowers, butterflies, turtles, peacocks, and many sons, in Obangsaek colors. They became important signifiers for her. The contradictions of the happy life expressed in them and the reality of oppression and loneliness for a young bride were common. In Korea, “Wrapping a Bottari” is also a colloquial and informal expression referring to a married woman leaving her family and home involuntarily or voluntarily to pursue her own life. These cultural and social conditions supply her *Bottari* with complex anthropological references as these bedcovers in ordinary homes witness the cycles of life. They contain the marks of birth, love, illness, departure and the death of those who once owned them.<sup>36</sup> They carry the memories of intimate home life with them. Kimsooja’s work integrates these marks of anonymous persons and their stories. These stories enable Kimsooja to present multiple layers of ordinary lives with no division between life and art.

While *Bottari* is a Korean tradition and term, what they signify is universal: the uncertainty of life and lives in transition or in transit, persons loaded down with their possessions. Kimsooja visually distills the stories of lives on the road, and the uncertain destiny of the people in migration or in exile, effectively, unpacking conditions of belonging, passage, hope, despair... by *artistically* packing. The *Bottari* and its unseen

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<sup>36</sup> Maxa Zoller, “Woman / Needle,” 2010, Accessed on March 17, 2021, [http://www.kimsooja.com/texts/Zoller\\_2010.html](http://www.kimsooja.com/texts/Zoller_2010.html).

contents conjure up poignant and traumatic stories of migrants and their sufferings of displacement from their own homes and countries.

*Cities on the Move -2727 Km Bottari Truck*, (1997), is a 33-minute film documenting a performance by Kimsooja. In November 1997, Kimsooja travelled for 11 days crisscrossing Korea, visiting all the towns she had lived in, naming them as the truck passed by them, documenting her nomadic childhood.<sup>37</sup> As a child, she moved frequently, and was separated from the friends she had made as her family followed her father in his military service. They moved around towns near the 38th Parallel demilitarized zone that separates North and South Korea. The memory of the Korean War still raw and painful to both sides, she experienced the anxiety of living near the conflict zone, and the tension and fear pervasive in such places. This experience provably shaped her deep concern for all migrant refugees from war-torn countries. She empathizes with the realities of refugees on their forced migration path, their past offering no protection and their future remaining uncertain.

The performance video work (edited down to 7 minutes and 33 seconds) was shown in the exhibition organized by Hans Ulrich Obrist and Hou Hanru entitled: *Cities on The Move* (1997-1999), a traveling curatorial project dealing with Nomadism. Following this exhibition, Kimsooja presented *d'Apertutto, Bottari Truck in Exile* at the 48th Venice Biennial in 1999, dedicating it to Kosovo refugees to remind viewers of the displacement, destruction and caused by the war in Kosovo, itself not far from Venice.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Airyung Kim, "Soo-Ja Kim: A solitary performance with old fabric," 1998, Accessed March 17, 2021, <http://www.kimsooja.com/texts/airyung.html>.

<sup>38</sup> Olivia Maria Rubio, "An Interview with Kimsooja," 2006, Accessed March 16, 2021, [http://www.kimsooja.com/texts/rubio\\_Interview.html](http://www.kimsooja.com/texts/rubio_Interview.html)

Since then, her *Bottari Truck - Migrateurs* (2007), *Bottari Truck - Migrateurs* (2009), and *Bottari Truck - Migrateurs* (2019) installations which she calls a ‘social sculpture’, and performances have continued to address the traumatizing conditions of refugees and migration from conflict zones.<sup>39</sup> The refugee crisis, controversies around border conflicts and the more recently, the forced separation of migrant children from their parents in the United States, further highlight the timeliness and importance of her work today calling on us to visualize and personalize the sufferings of those displaced.

### ***A Needle Woman (1999-2009)***

Taken together the performance/video pieces: *A Needle Woman* (1999-2001) eight-channel performance video, *A Needle Woman* (2005) six-channel performance video, and *A Needle Woman* (2009) single-channel performance video, form an integral single body of work for Kimsooja as a single *Bottari* of universe.

From 1999 to 2001, Kimsooja traveled through eight cities, creating an eight-channel performance video, entitled, *A Needle Woman* (1999-2001), from her street performances in Tokyo (Japan), Shanghai (China), Mexico City (Mexico), London (United Kingdom), Delhi (India), New York (USA), Cairo (Egypt), and Lagos (Nigeria). She chose the most densely populated cities for this project to investigate different metropolises, their cultural norms, cityscapes, and human interactions.

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<sup>39</sup> Art Basel, “Meet the Artists | Kimsooja,” February 19, 2020, YouTube Video, 3:39, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rop6C4hfxTU>.

In *A Needle Woman*, Kimsooja is standing still with her back toward us in unremarkable gray clothing in the midst of busy pedestrian streets in each metropolis . We see a sea of people and their expressions as they pass her by and disappear from the frame. Her body, skin, and senses probably keenly felt the effects of their energy, their smells and the noise passing by her in all directions. But the videos are soundless. We can only imagine the noise, different languages spoken, and volume in our mind. We are engulfed in the surge of people streaming by in the gigantic eight frames surrounding us. After a while, the artist's back blends in too. Each video is filled with images of ordinary, indistinguishable people making and living life, just passing through the streets filled with human traffic. She doesn't filter the people or their expressions for us. We encounter these people and the cityscapes directly and imagine what it might be like to be standing there ourselves or walking and passing her by on one of those streets.

Her first performance was in Shibuya Crossing in Tokyo. She experienced Japanese street culture and relationships with others firsthand. She was treated with complete indifference in Tokyo where the pedestrians absolutely avoided looking at her and passed by her as if she did not exist at all. She says she eventually reached an acceptance for her otherness in the crowded streets in Shibuya Crossing, morphing into an empty state of mind to embracing her invisibility. In this way, she was able to achieve calmness and stillness for the thirty- minute duration of her performance, eventually, even finding love and compassion for the people passing by.<sup>40</sup> Her experience of “invisibility” in Tokyo inspired her to visit other densely populated metropolises in order

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<sup>40</sup> Rubio, “An Interview with Kimsooja.”

to similarly investigate the unique local culture, to discover the relationship among residents and to herself as “the other,” and to find connection with them by standing still, in the middle.

The second piece in the series of *A Needle Woman* (2005) was six-channel video recording made from her street performances in Patan (Nepal), Jerusalem (Israel), Sana (Yemen), Havana (Cuba), Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), N’Djamena (Chad) which she presented at the Venice Biennial in 2005.<sup>41</sup> For this second set of *A Needle Woman* performances, Kimsooja specifically chose the cities for their ongoing social violence, civil war, or other political conflicts. A military coup was going on in Nepal where people were living under gunfire and street violence, in Jerusalem the daily conflicts between the Jewish settlers and Palestinians, a human rights crackdown in Havana, etc. Each city and its inhabitants were experiencing social and political upheaval in one form or another, including threats to physical safety, and even the daily possibility of death. Because of the intentional soundlessness of the videos, we do not hear the violence, such as gunshots, happening near them. Instead, we see the ordinary people going about their daily life. She also elected to slow down the speed of film. The slow motion makes their stride almost leisurely, with no impending sense of the dangers all around them. It is difficult to discern much difference among the people in the six cities as well as those among the people in the previous eight-channel video work -- other than in the Islamic countries like Yemen, or in African countries like Nigeria and Chad. In Sana there are hardly any women in the streets and if there are any, they are in black burka covering

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<sup>41</sup> Flaminia Generi Santoni, “Interview,” 2003, Accessed March 16, 2021, <http://kimsooja.com/texts/generi.html>

their entire bodies. The men are staring at the rare sight of an Asian woman without a burka standing alone and still. In N’Djamena, the children gather around her and their curiosity is palpable. So are the men enjoying the spectacle of an Asian Woman standing alone in silence and seemingly undisturbed by the spectators gathered around her. Again, without the different languages spoken, one sees people not so much through difference, but rather notices more the commonality among them regardless of their geographic location, ethnicity or local circumstances.

In 2009, she performed and filmed her third series of *A Needle Woman* in Paris (France) and presented a 25:00-minute loop single-channel video installation at the Nuit Blanche in Paris. This video documented the changing face of multi-ethnic social dynamics of Metropolitan Paris with its relatively recent influx of refugees and immigrants from France’s prior colonies.<sup>42</sup>

When the installation of *A Needle Woman* was shown on jumbo-sized multi-screens in The Perez Museum exhibition *Kimsooja: A Needle Woman* in June 2012, Kimsooja explained in her conversation with the curator, René Morales, that in each city among the crowd, she was imagining herself as a needle weaving together a fabric of passersby.<sup>43</sup> She imagined herself as connecting all the cityscapes, cities and their populations together like piecing together and sewing the bed covers she made with her mother. She wove the fifteen pieces into a tapestry of human community and saw herself as a *Bottari* bundling the people, their culture, social situations, circumstances, time and

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<sup>42</sup> Zoller, “Woman / Needle.”

<sup>43</sup> TheMiamiArtMuseum, “Artist Talk with Kimsooja and MAM Curator René Morales,” July 17, 2012, YouTube video, time mark 11:13-13:59 from 1:03:05 duration of the interview, (MAM is since renamed as Perez Museum in 2013,) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M3m2T4O0joE>.

space together in one huge *Bottari*. She imagined wrapping the universe in the imaginary *Bottari* she sewed together with her body as a needle creating invisible connections among them. It was a turning point in her work as she talked about the moment of transforming her body into a needle, the tool of her work.

“A needle is an extension of the body, and a thread is an extension of mind. The traces of mind stay always in the fabric, but the needle leaves the site when it's medialization is complete. The needle is a medium, a mystery, a reality, a hermaphrodite, a barometer, a moment, and a Zen.” -- Kimsooja, Interview with Nicholas Bourriaud, 2003.<sup>44</sup>

And she does not consider herself as the only needle. Other people walking on the streets and passing by her are also needles sewing the spaces and people they pass by. There is no ‘I and Them,’ or ‘I and You.’ She mirrors herself as others. And others mirror her.

During the same period as these Needle women performances, Kimsooja performed and documented another series of street performances that resulted in the single-channel videos: *A Beggar Woman* in Mexico City in 2000, followed by one in Cairo, and another in Lagos in 2001 and *A Homeless Woman* in Delhi, India in 2000, and in Cairo in 2001, and *A Laundry Woman* in Yamuna River in Delhi in 2000. She saw extreme poverty in these cities and decided to be a beggar and homeless herself. She sat or lay beggar or a homeless person over several days wondering how she would be treated and whether someone would give her money. She said she cried when a person dropped a coin in her hands acknowledging her as a beggar.<sup>45</sup> She understood what it was like to depend on others kindness and compassion for survival.

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<sup>44</sup> Bourriaud, “Nicholas Bourriaud and Kimsooja: Interview,” pg. 57.

<sup>45</sup> ““A Beggar Woman” & “A Homeless Woman” Kimsooja,” Art 21, Extended Play, 3:35 length of video, December 3, 2009, <https://art21.org/watch/extended-play/kimsooja-a-beggar-woman-a-homeless-woman-short/>.

During my conversation with Kimsooja, I asked her specifically about this series of performances in relation to her own life. She responded that it was an emotionally very challenging time in her life. She knew she had to leave Korea where there was no support for women artists and little recognition for her work, and limited future for her artistic ambitions. She left Korea and moved to NY in January 1999 alone. How vulnerable must she have felt then. However, she found courage and strength by facing her inner fears directly through these street performances. She used those experiences to propel her ideas to connect with the people, creating invisible *Bottari* of humanity with no divisive classifications. It is important to note that she was putting herself in the position of “the other” and not just treating it as a theme in her work.

Metaphorically connecting the people of the fifteen cities into a single *Bottari*, she transformed the previous signification of the *Bottari* as a bundle representing her own and others’ migrant story, and morphed it into a conceptual *Bottari* that could contain shared experience with other people and landscapes, as equal contents in a *Bottari* of international cities, geographically dispersed. Without being didactic and intentionally without sound, her work provides visual reminders of common humanity to invigorate our reactions to other human beings. Her imaginary single large *Bottari* of fifteen cityscapes and their people obliterates division, difference, and the usual hierarchies seeded among them. All are interconnected in her conceptual *Bottari*, revealing to us her spiritual utopian aspiration and vision.

Now asking myself, “Whose utopia?” I am met by the hopeful challenge of her work to my thinking. Instead of seeing each place as a separate utopia or dystopia, her work offers the possibility of seeing it from the perspective of shared and common



experience. She reminds us we are simply a part of that gigantic patchwork bedcover, a single *Bottari* of life.

Listening to her own words and thoughts on the process she had lived through in producing this body of work, I could see her instinctive connections to the utopian hope of Ernst Bloch for the futurity that is yet to come, and connections to both Enwezor's myriad centers of modernity in different trajectories and Foucault's heterotopias -- as interpreted through her own spirituality and philosophy. Muñoz proposed and used performance space as a site of resistance for marginalized peoples to articulate their diversity and their intersectional complexity. He championed performance spaces as places from which the classifications of mainstream culture could be suspended, rejected, and ultimately rewritten as an aesthetics of heterotopias. Employing a kind of "disidentification" of herself as a strategy to disappear into her work, Kimsooja manages to negate identification of gender, race, marital status, or age as the usual all-important indicators of being. In her videos, we do not see her face, only her back. In a sense, even if only for a time, her artistic medium is genderless. Declining to be labeled as a political artist, feminist artist, or an Asian artist, she resists the limits imposed by labels. She declares feminism is all about humanism.<sup>46</sup>

### ***To Breathe: Bottari (2013)***

*To Breathe: Bottari* (2013) is another important body of work for Kimsooja in achieving her idea of the oneness of life and art and her spiritual approach. For the 2013

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<sup>46</sup> Matt, "Interview."

Venice Biennale Korean Pavilion installation, Kimsooja brought her entire oeuvre of three decades into one space. *To Breathe: Bottari* was a conceptual, participatory performance work where one could experience her metaphoric vocabulary of three elements: the Bottari, Needle, and Obangsaek in an expanded form, assembling the *Totality of Art and Life* into a single event. Here the stage is provided for the audience to be the active performers completing the work, not the artist. She wrapped the windows of the Pavilion with a diffracting film which created prisms of rainbow-colored light from the sun. The interior was left empty other than mirrors on the surrounding walls, floors and ceilings. The space was filled with light and sound of her breathing and humming, from the artist's voice performance work of *Weaving factory*, 2004-2013.<sup>47</sup> Kimsooja was presenting the pavilion building itself as an Obangsaek light of *Bottari*. She was alluding to the presence of all the elements of the universal energy and the lands of visitors who entered the Pavilion. She surrounded the visitors with her inhales and exhales as they walked through the space. Her breath was a symbolic invisible needle sewing together their lives, their past and their present. Her breathing made me feel as if she had turned the pavilion into her living body and that I was (and other, *others* were) bundled within.

The mirrors reflected the images of the visitors – recalling that Michel Foucault used a mirror to explain utopia and heterotopias. In his “Of Other Spaces” in 1986, Foucault discussed the concept of utopia and heterotopias using a person in front of a mirror. A mirror is a utopia -- “placeless place” -- a virtual space where one can see

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<sup>47</sup> *The Weaving Factory*, 2004-2013, The artist's voice performance sound, 5.1 channel, 9:14, loop, for Kimsooja, *To Breathe-Bottari*, 2013, Solo Exhibition at the Korean Pavilion, Venice 2013, [http://www.kimsooja.com/projects/Korean\\_Pavilion\\_Venice\\_2013.html](http://www.kimsooja.com/projects/Korean_Pavilion_Venice_2013.html).

oneself being there in the mirror but it's not a real place. The mirror is also a heterotopia since it exists, but in one's own reflection one discovers "his [sic] absence" in the place of the mirror, because the person is not in the location of the mirror.<sup>48</sup> The mirror represents an alternative space, without being a physical location. This duality of relationship between self and reflection in the mirror, the presence and absence are also significant to Kimsooja. In her work, Kimsooja treats mirrors as invisible needles, breathing visitors' reflections in and exhaling them back out, and 'sewing' them together. However, the mirrors placed on the front of her *d'Apertutto, Bottari Truck in Exile*, (1999) seemed to allude to the stark reality of "no-place" for the Kosovo refugees.

*To Breathe: Bottari* was a kind of metaphoric and conceptual performance of weaving and connecting the myriad stories of the visitors wrapped into a *Bottari* of light and sound. The mirrors and breaths connect the people inside the pavilion together in one gigantic *Bottari*. Her utopian impulse invites us to experience an alternative to the divisiveness of the socio-political world outside. Before we exit the pavilion, we enter an anechoic chamber in complete darkness without sound, juxtaposing the experience of light and darkness, sound and silence, the dualities of life itself: a metaphoric experience of the Zen Buddhist spirituality expressing the cycles of life, death, and rebirth.<sup>49</sup> The work was no longer about her; it was about us and our lives, our common threads. Kimsooja helps us notice the unseen layers beyond the surface, from the interiority of

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<sup>48</sup> Michel Foucault and Jay Miskowiec, "Of Other Spaces." *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): pg. 24, Accessed March 16, 2021, doi:10.2307/464648. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/464648?seq=1>.

<sup>49</sup> BiennaleChannel, "Biennale Arte 2013- Republic of Korea," May 29, 2013, YouTube video, 3:00 length of video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2-jYVnKOxRY>.

ourselves, and become aware of the common humanity in our lives. Her expression of spiritual utopianism is further expanded in the *To Breathe-The Flags* (2012) series.

### ***To Breathe-The Flags* (2012)**

Asia Society Museum curators selected Kimsooja's video, *To Breathe - The Flags* (2012), for their first Asia Society Triennial: We Dream Together in October 2020. It is a single-channel video work looping for forty minutes and forty-one seconds on a room-sized screen. Superimposed images of 246 national flags are projected in alphabetical order in a slow motion. They are no longer individual flags that represent their unique national identities, appearing instead as a flowing composition of graphic designs emanating from the symbols, stripes, and colors of the individual flags themselves. The first version of this work was commissioned by the International Olympic Committee Museum in Lausanne, Switzerland for the 2012 London Olympics. The Olympics are a nationalistic and competitive event. Each national team and their delegates parade with their own national flag in distinct uniforms, highlighting their singular national identity, strength, and sovereignty. In contrast to this very nationalistic sentiment, Kimsooja created a video of collaged images of all participating national flags and called it, *To Breathe: The Flags* as a symbol of unifying the Olympic spirit. She created a transnational image from the flags: with no borders, no individual national identity, no conflicts and no hierarchy. The version presented at the Asia Society included other flags

of places not fully recognized as independent countries such as Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Tibet, honoring the people of the land.<sup>50</sup>

Kimsooja created an opportunity to think differently about national flags combining their colors and designs, making them visually more stimulating by erasing the borders and separateness, in favor of merging, melding, overlap and overlay. Instead of insisting on our differences, Kimsooja wants us to focus on our shared humanity and aspiration of peace and unity. The flags are presented in alphabetical order symbolizing no superiority of one country over another. This work is one of the more explicit expressions of the utopian aspirations of Kimsooja. In 2018, she presented *To Breathe-Zone of Nowhere* (2017), one of the *Flags* series in Perth Biennial, in Australia. There she declared:

“we have to find a solution to live together and to understand together, which is often divided by borders of nations, borders of belief and borders of tradition or identity. I wanted to blur that border and create a sort of one of Nowhere where we can be together and be harmonious together to create a utopia.”<sup>51</sup>

In her *Flags* series, we can connect with Bloch’s idea of a not-yet-being and not-yet-conscious futurity to find solutions for co-existence, acceptance, and respect for one another in the collaged images of national flags. The *Obangsaek* is referenced by the overlaying of one flag to the next while suggesting the need and possibility of universal harmony and togetherness.

Kimsooja’s journey began with exploring and questioning her own identity and belonging: first, as a nomadic child, later as a woman artist in Korea with the many

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<sup>50</sup> Kimsooja, *To Breathe-The Flags*, 2012, Single-channel video, 40:41 loop, ASIA Society TRIENNIAL: We Do Not Dream Alone, Accessed on March 16, 2021, <https://asiasociety.org/triennial/artist/kimsooja>.

<sup>51</sup> PICA Perth, “Zone of Nowhere by Kimsooja,” March 9, 2018, YouTube video, 2:11 length of video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uymi0B4XXZU>.

cultural and social limits that this entails, then as a nomadic artist since leaving Korea in 1999. She bridged her own struggles with the larger issues of humanity and human suffering, especially with the conditions of refugees, migrations, homelessness, beggars, and the condition of displacement. As she matured, her works took on more and more spiritual and metaphorical dimensions. In transforming her search of self into a discovery of others, she sees herself as a *Bottari* container of humanity and human conditions. Her motivations are sincere and spontaneous. She does not act from script, choosing instead to respond intuitively to the local conditions in which she places herself. She immerses herself in the situation to feel the depth of suffering and desperations of others, but first and foremost to answer her own existential questions. She does not filter the viewer's experience through her eyes. We experience directly her own sufferings merging with those of other people and their conditions: discovering her own physical and emotional limits and seeking truthful answers from herself in challenging conditions to move forward. It is similar to a monk going through the stages of spiritual enlightenment in meditation seeking the disappearance of self in the process. We respond to the positive humanity and hope presented in her work.

### **Totality of Art and Life**

“Totality is the truth and the reality of things. And it takes time to clarify in language as a whole. I am interested in approaching the reality that embraces everything because it is the only way to get to the point without manipulation. Most people approach reality from analysis or from ‘language to colligation’ which is the truth, but I am proposing a ‘colligation to be analyzed’ by audiences.... My working process is intuitive, and I believe in its logic. If I have an ambition, it is to be one who has no need to be anyone special, but is freed from human follies and desires -- without doing anything particular. ‘Being nothing/nothingness’ and making

nothing/nothingness is my goal.” – Kimsooja from Interview with Nicholas Bourriaud (2003)<sup>52</sup>

In the above passage, Kimsooja summarizes her aesthetic and philosophical approach to her art-making. As I previously stated, for Kimsooja “non-doing” and “non-making” are the core of her artistic practice. Non-doing and non-making imply accepting both material conditions and people as they were and are, without intervention or manipulation. She traces both non-doing and non-making to the influence of John Cage, specifically, his statement, “whether we try to make it or not, the sound is heard.”<sup>53</sup>

Cage gravitated to Eastern philosophy, practiced Zen meditation, composing music using principles derived from the I-Ching, subscribing to the idea that one could not control the outcome, and other unplanned music-making using random or chance occurrences. His break from classical music theory and its traditional confines, inspired his contemporaries in their search for the new, and innovations of their own. Composers like John Cage and Phillip Glass collaborated with dancers, writers, and visual artists, engaged and encouraged cross-pollination among the different disciplines of arts and made the Eastern philosophical approach to life a serious and valid intellectual and artistic pursuit. Kimsooja was deeply influenced by Cage’s radical break from the confines of Western traditions, which appealed to her leanings towards the Zen Buddhist teachings of letting go of self-ego in order to achieve a higher state of consciousness in one’s present life.

It may sound contradictory to pursue the Totality of Art at the same time as non-doing and non-making. She accomplishes this seemingly impossible task by

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<sup>52</sup> Bourriaud, “Nicholas Bourriaud and Kimsooja: Interview,” pg. 58.

<sup>53</sup> Bourriaud, “Nicholas Bourriaud and Kimsooja: Interview,” pg. 50.

metaphorically expanding her mediums. She activates our imagination to see the invisible *Bottari* made with invisible needles of the visitors. There is no separation between life and art and no separation between the artist and the viewer. In the 2013 Venice Biennale installation, she is not present physically, other than the sound installation of her breathing, while the visitors are the contents and actors completing the *Bottari*. Each day the Pavilion *Bottari* is made new by the random visitors and they are never static. She does nothing but provide the stage for those entering. In her *A Needle Woman* series, she is not doing anything but standing still on a street. The people walking past her do not know they are participating in the making of an artwork. They bring the conditions of their lives in their current social and political reality into her piece, much like a chance creation in Cage's music.

Performance artists have long been at the forefront of pushing the boundaries and challenging art institutions who could not classify them neatly into a category. Kimsooja is no exception in this regard. Her installations provide an empty stage where visitors are the performers and supply the content and context. This 'disappearance' of the artist into her work or merging herself into others is notably innovative even within the performance art category.

Kimsooja's work is about life. Since her first exhibition of *Bottari* in 1992, the presence and absence of memories of humanity and human conditions are essential subject matters and contents of her work. She reifies the ephemera of memories and traces of lived lives as they are and uses them without modifying the materials in her work. She executes her vision that art has the potential to contain the totality of life by presenting the whole of life's elements contained in used materials, including their past



and present conditions. By not altering the materials and not interpreting them for us, she presents a direct experience for the viewer unpacking the *Bottari*. The artist does not separate between her and viewers completing her work and there is no separation of life and art for her.

Nato Thompson quotes Michel Foucault in introducing *Living as Form*:

“What strikes me is the fact that in our society, art has become something which is related only to objects and not to individuals, or to life... But couldn't everyone's life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or house be an object, but not our life?”<sup>54</sup>

Kimsooja investigates the human condition and presents it in new ways for the viewers to experience commonality. She visualizes the impact of past and current events to site-specific, local social conditions of today for the viewers. At the same time, they experience local conditions of today in the context of global events. Her more than ten large site-specific installations, such as *To Breathe- the Flags* (2019), *The Bottari Truck - Migrateur* (2007), and *Bottari* (1999-2019) for the 2019 *Traversées/Kimsooja* for the Poitiers Art Festival in France in 2019, is a good example of how she engaged with local people and architecture, and other artists to create discourses on the subject of migration, border-crossing, and the influx of refugees to France.<sup>55</sup> Her work urges us to investigate the conditions of war, environmental disasters, displacement and resulting societal frictions. Presenting visual information without sound and no interpretative explanations leads us to launch our own investigation. She invites us to be curious. Kimsooja reminds

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<sup>54</sup> *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-201*, ed. Nato Thompson, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017), Introduction to Part 1. Front Matter

<sup>55</sup> So Young Moon, “Transforming a City's Memories: Works by Kimsooja Take on a New Context across Poitiers, France,” Korea JoongAng Daily, October 28, 2019, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2019/10/28/artsDesign/Transforming-a-citys-memories-Works-by-Kimsooja-take-on-a-new-context-across-Poitiers-France/3069544.html>.

us to consider a forgotten aspect of migration: a link to the “opening of a world of information and a world of interaction between cultures and people,” a ‘global sewing’ before the television and internet provided such function in modern time.<sup>56</sup>

### ***Bottari Utopia***

I have chosen to think about Kimsooja’s oeuvre within the context of the evolving utopian ideals from More to Bloch, and then to Foucault, Said, Enwezor, and Muñoz. Kimsooja’s own Zen spiritual utopianism is a departure from and expansion of their thinking. She does not focus on breaking down any particular identity-driven barriers of utopian ideals as Foucault, Said, Enwezor, or Muñoz progressively expanded on More’s utopianism. Instead, she demotes the separation of I and “the other” and erases borders by focusing on commonality, and non-hierarchical co-existence of people and nations, and further repositioning Bloch’s hope and emerging consciousness in contemporary context.

In her earlier “Sewn Works” series (1983-1992), such as *Heaven and The Earth* (1984), she was concerned with the structural elements of verticality and horizontality, of shape and space. The verticality represented sky, the horizontality represented the earth, with humanity in the middle.<sup>57</sup> The shape of the cross and its symbolic meaning was important to her. We can compare this early phase with More’s Utopia where the structure of the Republic and perfect constitution is responsible for providing men with a just and happy life. The structure of a cross, its verticality and horizontalness also

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<sup>56</sup> Obrist, “Wrapping bodies and souls.”

<sup>57</sup> Rubio, “An Interview with Kimsooja.”

symbolize the duality of life inherent: life and death, the balance of yin and yang for Kimsooja.

Her second phase of utopian aspiration correlates to Bloch's futurity of not-yet-consciousness and can be seen from her earlier physical *Bottari* objects, and *Bottari Truck* series. The fact that a *Bottari* can be wrapped, then unwrapped is similar to the past and present becoming the future. The potential of humanity as not-yet-being and not-yet-conscious is implicit in this body of work. Her unfolding hope is presented in memories, time and personage, and their potential for transformation and openness toward the existential conditions. Anthropological, temporal, social and environmental contents and marks of life contained in her physical *Bottari* objects are very much the promises of the futurity of her own emerging consciousness as well as those of others.

*A Needle Woman, A Beggar Woman, A Homeless Woman, and A Laundry Woman* can be seen as the third phase of Kimsooja's utopian aspiration as she rejects subjectification and objectification by pursuing a disidentification. The period reveals her intuitive rejection of classification and Orientalism -- in alignment with the observations of Foucault, Said, Enwezor, and Muñoz -- instead, embracing decolonization and advancing Foucault's heterotopias in her use of multi-channel video that captures myriad co-existent centers of human activity and community.

The fourth phase of utopia expressed in her later installation works is a departure from Western philosophy and from the previous identity-specific invocations of inclusiveness. These installations featuring conceptual *Bottari* (rather than their literal incarnation as material bundles) such as *To Breathe: Bottari* (2013), and *To Breathe: The Flags* (2012) express this departure and a re-centering of her Zen Buddhist spiritual

utopianism. The spiritual and metaphoric reach of her utopian aspirations of togetherness and co-existence are reaffirmed in these installations -- the void, and empty spaces are there for the others to occupy, and seeing no division between herself and others. She progresses from a non-hierarchy -- among the people of the fifteen cities in her *A Needle Woman* (1999-2009) -- to an even larger suggested non-hierarchy of nations in *To Breathe-The Flags* (2012). Her version and vision of utopia encompasses Foucault's heterotopias, as well as Bloch's view of man's anticipatory consciousness that creates new knowledge of future possibilities. Bloch specified that art should be more than beauty, embodying an 'excess' over and above ideology that can activate as-not-yet potentials needed for the transformation of society.<sup>58</sup> Kimsooja's works contain such excess: the hope for a utopian futurity, the aspiration to effect change, the social-engagement of the artist himself or herself [sic]. Her harmonious utopia is where national borders, and differences in traditions and beliefs disappear. Her works do not protest. Her aesthetics are silence and openings that invite anyone to enter and experience and come to their own conclusions. There is no divide between the people who are in her videos, herself, and her viewers. She connects to the undying hope of people in spite of the tenuous and fragile conditions of life and to her *Bottari* utopia.

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<sup>58</sup> Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, pg. 14.

## Conclusion

Revisiting the question, I originally proposed in the introduction of this investigation, “Whose utopia?” I will now address whether or not and how artists and the arts can bring about transformation of society for a better future.

Kimsooja helps me answer the question “Whose utopia?” with her aesthetics and philosophy that urges the seeing of oneself in others. There is no ‘ego of I’ but rather her outstretched compassion and contemplative embracing of others as she stands in the crowd, waits or sits along streets across the planet. In her borderless efforts, engagements, and encounters, I breathe and find something akin to the emerging consciousness of which Bloch wrote in his *The Principle of Hope*; that humans possess an anticipatory consciousness which gives people not-yet-conscious knowledge of future possibility. In Kimsooja’s *Bottari*, that anticipatory consciousness appears as a silent chronicling of open spaces filled with individual, unique, and non-specificity. She envisions a future, where political, economic-and social conditions of each and everyone are no longer a divisive factor and people are wrapped together in their common humanity just by sharing space and air. In Kimsooja’s *Bottari*, no one and no underrepresented group must prove their worthiness to be included. Everyone is already within.

I find hope and inspiration in Kimsooja’s artistic vision of one gigantic universal *Bottari* utopia where everyone is bundled in by virtue of simply being present and not because of doing something that is valued by someone else. The world is indeed in the process of becoming and is not-yet-finished. Our consciousness is also in the process of becoming. If we can embrace the Bloch’s “excess” expressed in her art and actively

engage with looking beyond our own circumstances then and only then can we *hope* to bridge the experience of displacement under the pandemic with those of others sufferings, and become catalysts in the transformation towards a better futurity.

Kimsooja offers an opportunity to re-center *hope* for utopia in a contemporary global context. As I elaborated in chapter two positioning her work in relation to the writings of More, Bloch, Foucault, Said, Enwezor, and Muñoz, who increasingly extended utopia to groups excluded from the mainstream, Kimsooja's art reflects upon and includes people who have been historically marginalized and have not had sufficient places in which to belong. By wrapping everyone into her imaginary and conceptual *Bottari* without reference to their racial, social, or gender identity, without subjectification or objectification, she proffers what I have called a *Bottari* utopia. Kimsooja's *Bottari* utopia does not belong to any specific group. Whether they walk in the streets of New York, London, Tokyo, Shanghai, Mexico City, Delhi, Cairo, Lagos, or Patan, Sana, Jerusalem, Havana, Rio de Janeiro, N'Djamena, or Paris, they are all wrapped together in a single metaphoric and aspirational bundle of humanity. She is promoting a global vision of finding solutions to live together independent of the borders of belief, traditions or national identity dividing or pitting people against one another.

Kimsooja 's oeuvre offers us new ways to unpack the conditions of displacement by deliberately choosing *not* to further saturate her viewers with the terrible inequities and sufferings of displacement and exile. Her approach may not immediately galvanize sympathetic responses to disaster but it does reawaken our curiosity, sensitivity and sensibility to the mundane routines and everyday life interactions of people across the globe. A *Bottari Truck* left on a street or *Bottari* bundles left on a floor invites us to look

for the missing owners and wonder where they came from and what happened to them, compelling viewers -- who may not have had any personal interest previously in these subjects -- to consider the impact of social, political, and human conflicts on otherwise unseen people whether living across continents or exiled displacement. Her contemplative and silent approach to our human condition encourages viewers to meditate on “persons” not what they represent, how they might be classified, and to feel deeper and familiar connections despite not having met or those not being “our” streets. I would argue that she has been more effective than other artists in her approach by suggesting hope beyond fear, fragility and despair. It is the resilience of hope that one responds to whether considering the uncertainties of life under the pandemic, war, famine, disaster, or a life-threatening forms of social exclusion.

In the context of the pandemic her work is equally instructive. As witnessed in 2020-2021, the pandemic has impacted all, and the displacement it has brought about is global in scale, touching everyone regardless of where they live or how they lived previously. Meanwhile, it has further exposed and dramatically increased the disadvantages of those who already lived and live at the margins of society in otherwise developed and privileged nations. Activists and artists’ voices who speak to and on behalf of refugees, such as Kimsooja, Ai Weiwei, Yoko Ono, and Olafur Eliasson can be important contributors to the vital and complex discussion of injustice and inequity imposed on all people in difficulty -- including and especially, global refugees, victims of police brutality, domestic violence, or the victims of hate crimes such as Asian Americans and the LGBTQ community.

Devastation is much closer to home than we imagined before: a virus, a fire, a flood, or an act of terrorism, can strike any of us at any moment unannounced and unprepared, ejecting us from public space, normalcy, work, home, community, and even family. We live in a completely connected world and none of us are shielded from misfortunes falling on others. Not knowing when suffering might end, if or when, we might be able to resume the life we lived before can be conditions that unite us, if we choose. What will it take to convince us further? Will the *Bottari* utopia end in another fantasy aspiration, remaining an abstract idea of More's perfect utopian republic constitutions, or are there things we can do to ensure arriving at a "concrete utopia?"

Kimsooja's aesthetics and art-making practices can be very convincing but only if we know they exist and have the opportunity to see, visit, experience them. Like most artists, without the internet Kimsooja's work was almost completely unavailable unless one could travel to biennials, or to museums in foreign countries hosting her exhibitions. Digital platforms make her work available to anyone who has access to the internet without the cost and time associated with travel to such venues -- and given pandemic restrictions, whose own futures are now in question. Without such access, there is limited opportunity for her to engage with ordinary people on the important questions of exile, migration, and displacement, or for them to know she exists.

The seemingly borderless world of virtual connectivity and its decentralized platforms are dramatically changing the way people experience art, communicate about art-making, and participate in the discourses surrounding social engagement. Via the internet, independent scholars and artists' perspectives have gained traction outside of formal institutional settings. More diverse voices and new types of super-heroes formed



by today's viral visual culture, have the power to generate and disseminate new criteria, and even cultivate new audiences. They have the potential to impact, if not dismantle, carefully protected bastions of institutional and cultural power, by amplifying the influence of independent cultural agents working outside of the usual institutional spaces. The digital virtual platforms and potentially borderless Internet will continue to change the dynamics of how we engage with others to learn, work, love, exchange and transact. It is an opening of another dimension to Foucault's heterotopias.

The pandemic exposed that there is a large gap in accessibility to the Internet even in wealthy countries like the USA. Rural and less populated areas, inner cities and poorer communities suffer gross inadequacies in basic access and in equipment distribution. When schools shut down and classes were moved online, children and young people in those communities were suddenly even more deprived with respect to getting an access to education, support and guidance. Single parents struggle even more between holding on to jobs and homeschooling their children. This will further exacerbate gaps in knowledge, skill and wealth, permanently disadvantaging marginalized populations. We cannot deny such realities existing in our own country, let alone in refugee camps and poorer nations around the world. Unless we address this digital gap among haves and have-nots, we cannot claim social progress, or even really hope for a better future. Any improvement we achieve will continue to be compromised by the same issues of inequality and injustice. Indeed the pandemic presents us with an opportunity to examine the limits of neo-liberalism and redefine the concept of stakeholders and socially sustainable business practices. I would argue that without equal access to the digital platforms, Whose utopia? will have to be answered on the basis of the pre-existing condition of digital access and

its resulting hierarchy. Access to the internet and to computer equipment -- or at least a smartphone -- is as essential today as food, water, air and shelter in order to narrow education, knowledge, skills, and future wealth gaps. I am interested in how Kimsooja might respond to this conundrum. In her continuing pursuit to realize *Bottari* utopia, I would invite her reflections on the problems of digital divide. She launched her website in 2003 to open a forum for people to communicate openly and honestly about the art world and the world in general directly rather than being misinformed or getting distorted views of media and popular journalism.<sup>59</sup> It is at this time, she chose to present her name without separating the last and first name claiming her own identity independent to social norms and classifications. She is keenly aware of the impacts and limits of artists in their actions to usher in social and political changes. Yet, she does not hesitate to act with her conviction in humanitarian and ethical responsibilities.

Today, the power of visual language in building new meaning is apparent in the digital virtual world and social media that we have come to rely on. This shaping and re-shaping of social values can be profound, forming the basis for new expectations and knowledge, ones that are ever-more open and accessible to everyone. Within this matrix, artists have a responsibility and an extraordinary opportunity to establish new social significance, order and goalposts that reflect and secure equality and justice in the realization of social promise. Activist-artists' disruption of the Whitney Biennial in 2019, with their demand for the resignation of Warren Kanders from the museum Board is one example of how artists can make a difference. Another example is the success of Nan Goldin's initiative *PAIN* which similarly demanded that museums remove the Sackler

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<sup>59</sup> Oliva Sand, "An Interview with Kimsooja," 2006  
[http://www.kimsooja.com/texts/sand\\_06.html](http://www.kimsooja.com/texts/sand_06.html)

family name from their wings and galleries. The success of *PAIN*'s campaign was galvanized by the haunting visual images of painkillers spilled on museum floors accompanied by people acting as if they were dying from overdose which went viral over the Internet garnering immediate global attention and support. After innumerable and spontaneous BLM demonstrations in 2020, scores of announcements were made by museums declaring their commitment to access, equity, diversity and inclusion in their collections, exhibitions, and hiring practices, similarly demonstrating successful intervention by artist-activists in breaking down the barriers of institutional power and control.

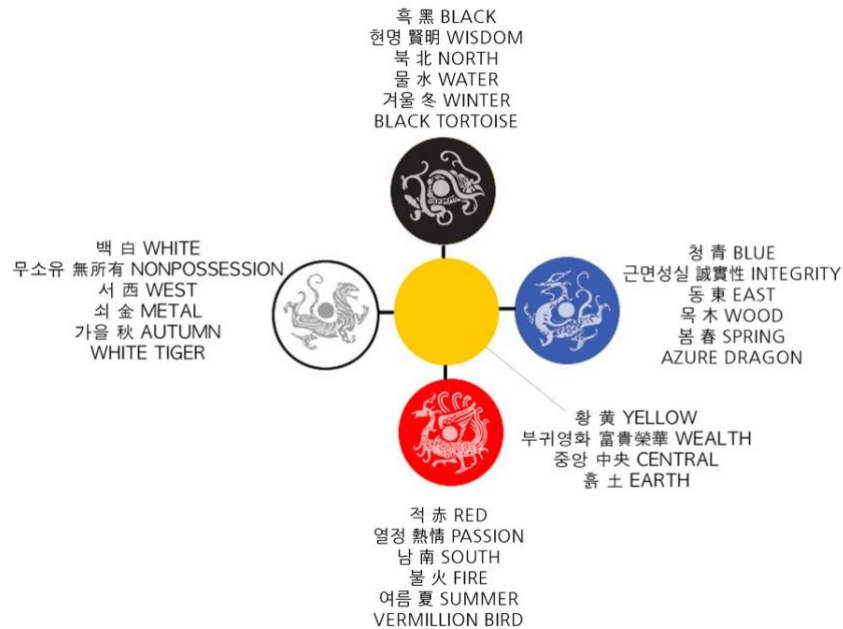
Artists have always been social visionaries. They have also frequently been activists -- intentionally and unintentionally -- challenging social norms and limits in their realization of the seen, and the as-yet unseen, of their times. And they have routinely been subjected to ostracization, ridicule, economic precarity as a result. This frequent outsider status, while enormously costly, also affords certain kinds of personal liberty and opportunity, and perspective that others may not have, or be able or willing to risk. As such being an artist places one already at a crossroads as students of history and dream creators of the future, as insider-outsiders within their own culture, society and even community, as practitioners of the not-yet-being. These latent qualities are precisely what is needed when one seeks to bring about change, especially on a grand scale... but only if they/we take on the work, remain vigilant and pursue increasingly inclusive positive and lasting change.

In attempting to answer "Whose utopia?" I came to realize that the open and spiritual utopianism expressed by Kimsooja, is ultimately about awakening ourselves, our

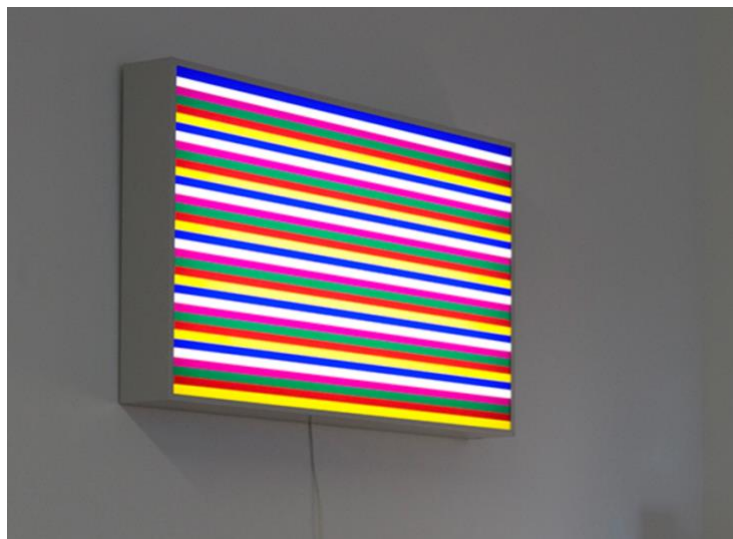
own consciousness to reach out to others wherever they may be or however they got there, and to engage with the root causes of inequity and injustice beyond our own concerns and circumstances with compassion and empathy. If there is any learning from Kimsooja's Zen spiritual practice, it is to see the fact that we are each other's mirrors. It is up to us to actualize the *Bottari* utopia. Let us be reminded, "Art is the production of knowledge"- Okwui Enwezor.

## Illustrations

[Figure 1] “Philosophy-“Five Direction Colors or Obangsaek <오방색: 五方色>,” Hanbok Heroes, Published on May 02, 2020, <https://herohanbok.wordpress.com/philosophy/>.



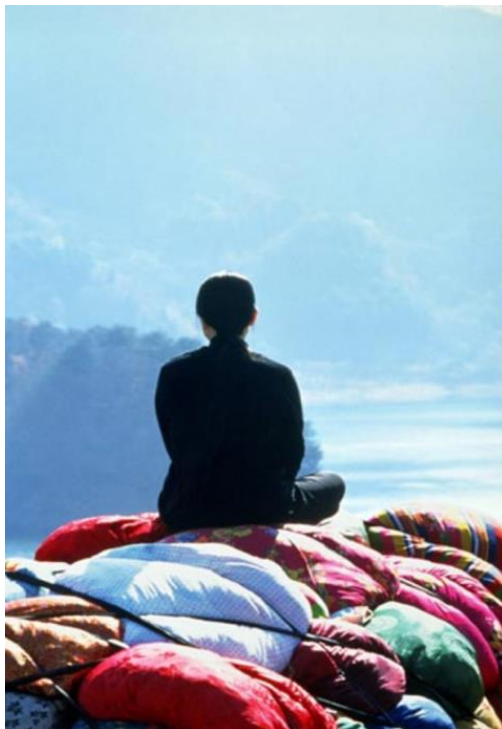
[Figure 2] Kimsooja, *To Breathe: Obangsaek*, 2015, Duraclear Photographic Print in Lightbox, 120 x 75 x 15.25 cm, Image courtesy of Kimsooja Studio



[Figure 3] Kimsooja, *Deductive Object*, 1992, used Korean bed covers and clothes, dimensions variable, Bottari Installation at MoMA PS1 Open Studios, Courtesy of PS1 Contemporary Art Center, New York, and Kimsooja Studio, Image courtesy of Kimsooja Studio



[Figure 4] Kimsooja, *Cities on the Move – 2727 km Bottari Truck*, 1997, Production still, Image courtesy of Kimsooja Studio



[Figure 5] Kimsooja, *Cities on the Move – 2727 km Bottari Truck*, 1997, Single channel performance videos, 7:03, Silent, Image provided by Kimsooja Studio



[Figure 6] Kimsooja, *d'Apertutto, or Bottari Truck in Exile*, 1999, 2.5-ton truck stacked with Bottaris, 20 x 6.5 m mirror structure, 49th Venice Biennale, Arsenale, Venice 1999, Photo by Luca Campigotto, Image courtesy of Kimsooja Studio



[Figure 7] Kimsooja, *Bottari Truck – Migrateurs*, 2007, Single channel performance video, 10:10, silent, Image courtesy of Kimsooja Studio



[Figure 8] Kimsooja, *Bottari Truck*, 2007, site-specific installation consisting of 1976 Peugeot 404 pickup truck, Bottaris, Installation view at Chapelle Saint Louis, 2019, Courtesy of the City of Poitiers and Kimsooja Studio, Photo by Jan Liegeois, Image courtesy of Kimsooja Studio



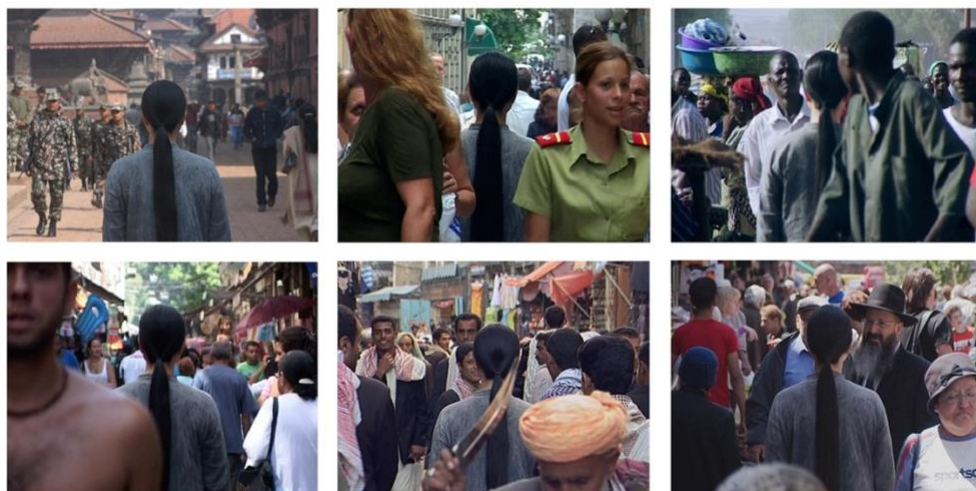


[Figure 9] Kimsooja, *A Needle Woman*, 1999-2009

Part 1: Kimsooja, *A Needle Woman*, 1999-2001, Stills from Tokyo (Japan), Shanghai (China), Mexico City (Mexico), London (England), Delhi (India), New York (U.S.A.), Cairo (Egypt), and Lagos (Nigeria), 8 channel performance video Installation, 6:33, silent, Image courtesy of Kimsooja Studio



Part 2: Kimsooja, *A Needle Woman*, 2005, Stills from Patan (Nepal), Jerusalem (Israel), Sena (Yemen), Havana (Cuba), Rio de Janero (Brazil), and N'Djamena (Chad), 6 channel performance video installation, 10:30, silent, Image courtesy of Kimsooja Studio



Part 3: Kimsooja, *A Needle Woman*, 2009, Installation at Nuit Blanche, Paris,  
Commissioned by Nuit Blanche Paris 2009, Photo by Thierry Depange, Image courtesy  
of Kimsooja Studio



[Figure 10] Kimsooja, *A Beggar Woman* – Lagos, 2001, Single channel performance  
video, 8:50, silent, Image courtesy of Kimsooja Studio



[Figure 11] Kimsooja, *A Homeless Woman* – Cairo, Egypt, 2001, Single channel performance video, 6:33, Silent, Image courtesy of Kimsooja Studio



[Figure 12] Kimsooja, *A Laundry Woman* – Yamuna River, India, 2000, Single channel performance video, 10:30, Silent, Image courtesy of Kimsooja Studio



[Figure 13] Kimsooja, *To Breathe – Bottari*, 2013, Mixed media installation with sound, The Weaving Factory, 2004-2013, The Artist's voice performance sound, 5.1 channel, 9:14, (Anechoic Chamber: Kimsooja, *To Breathe: Blackout*, 2013, Anechoic chamber in complete darkness,) Solo Exhibition at the Korean Pavilion, Venice, 2013, Image Courtesy of Kimsooja Studio



[Figure 14] Kimsooja, *To Breathe: Flags*, 2012, Single channel video, 40:41, Installation Asia Society Triennial: "We Do Not Dream Alone" at Asia Society Museum, New York, October 27, 2020-June 27, 2021, Image Courtesy of Kimsooja Studio



[Figure 15] Kimsooja, *To Breathe – Zone of Nowhere*, 2017, Installation consisting of 30 polyester flags, 243 x 152 cm each, Installation view at Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, Perth, 2018, Commissioned by Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, Courtesy of Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, Perth and Kimsooja Studio, Photos by Alessandro Bianchetti, Image Courtesy of Kimsooja Studio



[Figure 16] Kimsooja, *To Breathe*, 2019, site-specific installation consisting of diffraction-grating film, Installation view at the Cloître des Augustins, 2019, Courtesy of the City of Poitiers and Kimsooja Studio, Photos by Yann Gachet, Image Courtesy of Kimsooja Studio



[Figure 17] Kimsooja, *Bottari: 1999-2019*, 2019, site-specific installation consisting of shipping container painted the colors of obangsaek, containing all of the artist's personal possessions from her New York apartment. Installation view at Cathédrale Saint-Pierre, 2019. Courtesy of the City of Poitiers and Kimsooja Studio. Photos by Yann Gachet and Sebastien Laval, Image Courtesy of Kimsooja Studio



[Figure 18] Kimsooja, *Heaven and The Earth*, 1984, used clothing fragments, thread, acrylics, Chinese ink on canvas cloth, 190 x 200 cm, Collection of the artist, Image Courtesy of Kimsooja Studio



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