

# KIMSOOJA

## Works and Process

By [David Ebony](#)

*To Breathe: Bottari*, Kimsooja's exhibition at the Korean Pavilion, was one of the most memorable presentations at the 2013 Venice Biennale. The Korean-born New York-based artist had the audacity to offer visitors an anechoic—or sensory deprivation—chamber off the main gallery of the pavilion, which served as an antidote to the sensory-overload that is the hallmark of most Biennale installations. Visitors to the pavilion were obliged to remove their shoes before entering and sign a waiver relieving the show's organizers of responsibility for claustrophobia-induced maladies like heart-attack or stroke.

The pavilion's main gallery was devoid of objects or images. In an effort to create what she refers to as “visual breathing,” Kimsooja covered all the windows, the glass walls, and the ceiling with a diffraction grating film, a translucent plastic laminate that fractures light into a kaleidoscope of shimmering rainbow-like spectra. Bouncing off the mirror-covered floors, the flickering rays immersed the viewer in a colorful and sometimes blinding prismatic haze that shifted with the movement of the body as well as that of clouds and the sunlight's mutable intensity. Permeating the evocative atmosphere, a soundtrack of the artist breathing, with varying pace and force, invited a meditative and at times hallucinatory state that was as close to a transcendent



Kimsooja. Korean Pavilion in Venice.

experience as one is likely to experience at the Biennale.

A doorway on one side of the main gallery led to the small anechoic chamber, where only a few visitors at a time were allowed to enter. Black foam panels covering the walls and ceiling and a carpeted floor provided total soundproofing and a completely darkened space once the door was closed. Only a tiny green light above the door indicated the exit for those anticipating a panic attack. Once deprived of all visual and audio sensation, each occupant's throbbing heartbeat and pulsating veins were the only signs that life and time remained constant. After personal reverie ebbed and physical discomfort ensued, stepping back out into the prismatic light proved exhilarating and exalting.

Kimsooja has been engaged with similar sensory explorations in her art for some years. To coincide with the Biennale presentation, she recently released a documentary about her work on DVD, *Kimsooja: Works and Process* [a.p.r.e.s editions, 2012], which traces the evolution of her art. Actually the DVD consists of a compilation of eight videos produced over the past decade. Most of the films were directed by longtime Kimsooja collaborator Gilles Coudert, who focuses mainly on each installation's construction on site, interspersed with commentary by the artist describing her thought process and the conceptual basis of the work at hand. *Works and Process* covers some of the major projects that culminate in Venice's *To Breathe: Bottari*. Remarkably consistent in quality and tone, the films, ranging from five minutes to a half hour in length, feature footage from performances and installations, plus several interviews. Collectively, they illuminate the varied thematic concerns and complex formal attributes of her work.

The DVD begins with the most recent film, *Le Voyage Immobile*, 2012, which is a kind of overview of the artist's career. Raised Catholic in Korea, and having often felt like an outsider, Kimsooja has led a peripatetic lifestyle as an adult. Migration, diaspora, and emigration are constant themes in her work, which certainly lends it a global appeal. Other important concerns surround mundane, repetitive activities like doing the laundry, sewing, and breathing.

The following films are more in-depth studies of individual projects and installations. They do not attempt to re-create the experience of encountering a work by Kimsooja firsthand, which affords both a personal interpretation and private reverie. Instead, the approach used in the films is pragmatic and analytical, without being dull or plodding. They often depict, in detail, the construction process and specificities of

the various sites while relying on the artist's voiceovers and interviews to convey each work's intended meaning and effect. There is also considerable emphasis on audience reactions to the finished pieces or performances.

*Mirror Woman: The Ground of Nowhere*, 2003, tracks the construction of a monumental site-specific installation for the vast atrium of Honolulu's City Hall. Commemorating the centenary of Korean immigration to Hawaii, Kimsooja suspended from the ceiling's open-air skylight a 42-foot-high circular curtain-like construction. Billowing white fabric reaches to the ground to create a circular enclosure with a mirrored floor. Visitors entering the space gaze up at the open sky through the oculus. Here, the body becomes an isolated element, a metaphor for the geographical isolation of Hawaii itself, surrounded as it is by vast expanses of water.

*To Breathe: A Mirror Woman* documents Kimsooja's elaborate 2006 installation for the Crystal Palace in Madrid's Retiro Park. Closely related to the Venice installation, the piece features glass walls and ceiling all covered with refraction grating film, as well as a mirrored-covered floor. Kimsooja managed to transform this already fabulous beaux-arts building into a spectacular prism, in which visitors are enveloped by flickering light of the spectrum, with the surrounding park and its greenery visible through the rainbows, adding the grandeur of nature to the mix.

Perhaps the most engaging video in the compilation focuses on *Bottari Truck—Migrateurs*, a 2007 performance in Paris. In this work, Kimsooja directs a team of assistants to create bottari, bundles of colorful cloth that refer to the scant worldly possessions that migrants carry with them from one place to another in times of upheaval and duress. They are featured in many of Kimsooja's earlier installations. Here, she piles dozens of them in the back of a pick-up truck. Dressed all in black, and seated atop the colorful heap, Kimsooja adopts a stoic posture as she is driven through the streets of Paris, especially districts that are home to recent immigrants from all over the world. The reactions and expressions of sidewalk onlookers are fun to watch. Apparent even in the video, the performance was one of those rare events in art that manages to be at once lighthearted and profound.