

An Artist Invites Viewers to Attain Stillness of Mind Together

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Kimsooja, "Archive of Mind" (2016), installation view with sound performance "Unfolding Sphere" (image courtesy of the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art and Hyundai Motor Co.; photo by Jeon Byung Cheol; all images provided by Kukje Gallery)

At the South Korean conceptual artist Kimsooja's new participatory installation, *Archive of the Mind* — which is also the title of her exhibition at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Seoul (MMCA) — I engaged in a strangely calming activity. On entering a large, dimly lit room fitted with a 19-meter-long elliptical table, participants were encouraged to take a sizable chunk of clay from one of four different-colored slabs. We were then urged by Kimsooja herself to roll it between both palms to make a round clay ball. Throaty gurgling sounds from her accompanying sound performance "Unfolding Sphere" filled the space and engulfed us as we sat on three-legged stools kneading the clay. Once our balls were ready, we were asked to leave them on the table among the hundreds of others that had been made by previous participants. While the idea seemed a bit odd and made me skeptical at first, the combined effect of the guttural soundtrack and the gesture of moving both hands in a rhythmic fashion was unexpectedly meditative. Thousands of balls have already been placed in storage to make space for new audiences to leave behind the remnants of their visit.

It is no surprise that Kimsooja's new work has been a huge hit. In her previous performance series *A Needle Woman* (1999–2001), her stationary body was thrust in the middle of the moving masses in cities like Shanghai, Tokyo, New York, and Delhi, contrasting movement with stasis and evoking the necessity of staying still. This idea of attaining stillness is crucial to Kimsooja's practice. Now, like her predecessors from the *Dansaekhwa* movement of the 1970s, whose repetitive process was intended to void the mind of all thoughts, she engages her audience in a communal endeavor to alter or void the archives of their minds through the meditative act of rolling putty in their hands.



Kimsooja, "A Study on Body" (1981), series of five silkscreen prints on paper, 34 x 34 cm (courtesy of the artist; image provided by Kukje Gallery)

The round clay balls also recall Kimsooja's iconic bundles, referred to as *bottari* in Korean, from her 1997 video *Bottari Truck*. The artist's peripatetic childhood in a military family taught her from a very young age what it meant to be on the move, and from her earliest practice in 1992, the notion of dislocation and its antithesis of permanence has been pervasive in most of her work. Like the clay balls, each *bottari*, which was made from traditional bedcovers and contained household objects, became a single unit of cohesiveness and stability. They were then piled in a heap in a truck and driven around South Korea, the bundles becoming symbolic icons of permanence amid the transience of movement. Even the act of tying the four opposite quadrants of the cloth that shaped the bundles was emblematic of keeping things intact.

Deeply imbued by the tenets of Hindu and Buddhist philosophy, Kimsooja's belief in peace and worldwide harmony, akin to the highly effective Indonesian performance artist Arahmaiani's practice, has become a preoccupation. In her ongoing film series *Thread Routes*, which began in 2010, Kimsooja draws a connection between the ancient practices of textile culture in Peru, Europe, India, and China, which are featured in the first four chapters of the work, respectively. In the fifth chapter, now on view at the MMCA, she focuses on the tradition of weaving in Native American communities. Women's manual dexterity is a common feature in all the films, and this one shows Native American women making intricate hand-woven baskets.



Kimsooja, "Thread Routes – Chapter V" (2016), still image from 16mm film transferred to HD format, 21:48 (image provided by Kukje Gallery)

Kimsooja's practice, which emphasizes stillness of mind and the similarities between different cultures, is an attempt to offer some resolution in these times of war, paranoia, fear, and discrimination. However, her oval-shaped multicolored sculpture *Deductive Object* (2016), which is placed on a highly reflective surface in MMCA's outdoor quadrangular space, is less compelling. Though the conceptual piece is inspired by the sacred Indian stone that historians refer to as the "egg of the universe," and though it is meant to contain pellets of energy, it does not have the resonance of her participatory installation, nor does it evoke the visual tactility of her films.



Kimsooja, "Deductive Object" (2016), painted welded steel, aluminum mirror panels, sculpture 2.45 x 1.5 (dia.) m, mirror 10 x 10 m

The impact of Kimsooja's best works lies in her ability to communicate her deeply spiritual vision through the use of her own body. For the first time, through *Archives of the Mind*, the artist encourages the audience to physically engage with her work and experience the significance of her metaphorical bottari bundles, and the effects of doing so remain with us long after we have exited the museum.