

Kimsooja *To Breathe – Zurich*

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Sewing and Reflecting

by *Christiane Meyer-Stoll*

With her installation *To Breathe – Zurich* Kimsooja inscribes her work in the architecture of the Tschudi Gallery. She utilizes the architectural surfaces of the space as the material support for her «painting». All the windows facing the street have been covered in light-diffraction grating film: «This particular film has thousands of vertical and horizontal lines in every inch. It has a woven structure and functions like a prism, creating iridescent light when light passes through it.» (Kimsooja in conversation with Hou Hanru, 2017). The artist also tiled the floor of the gallery with mirror panels. These reflect the ceiling of the space downwards and create the illusion of a dizzying depth. The floor seems almost to dissolve: it appears like a liquid surface, in which the viewers are simultaneously reflected on an unfamiliar vertical axis. The space is otherwise empty – and yet, it is full.

The weather and the shift from day to night are fundamental aspects of the work. When the sky is overcast, the view from the outside into the gallery may seem unremarkable – but that changes as soon as the clouds disperse and rays of sunlight spark a colourful play of light on the window pane, or when the light spectrum of the interior is visible outside in the dark. Looking from the inside towards the city street outside, we experience not just a spectacular play of colour and light, especially the lights of passing cars, but also a surprising multiplication of all that moves. Passers-by, for example, are joined by colourful, transparent apparitions of themselves. Transcendence, time, space, and continuous transformation are immanent in the work.

At the same time, *To Breathe – Zurich* makes tangible the sparkling, iridescent, richly colourful qualities of light. «This is one of my investigations into the structure of painting, of canvas, and of color and pigment in relation to light.» (Kimsooja in conversation with Hou Hanru, 2017). What is light? How can light be grasped, understood, described? The most sophisticated theories in physics can only provide an approximation of the phenomenon of light. Part of the essence of light is its ambiguity: wave or particle. Light is immaterial, intangible and cannot be localised. The installation allows us to experience the mystery of light.

Following a transformative experience in 1983, Kimsooja exchanged the paintbrush for the sewing needle: «The energy of my body channeled through the needle, seeming to connect to the energy of the world. From that moment, I understood the power of sewing: the relationship of needle to fabric is like that of my body to the universe.» (Kimsooja in conversation with Mary June Jacob, 2002/03). The metaphor of the needle undergoes a continuous transformation in her work. Kimsooja began to

equate her body with a needle; the impact of the body sews together divergent elements such as cultures or attitudes. For example in her video installation *A Needle Woman* (1999–2001), the artist stands still against the current of surging crowds in eight large cities. Her back is turned toward the viewers, who see her like a «needle» around whom the action revolves – or also like a mirror reflecting the world. She increasingly conceives activities such as seeing, breathing, reflecting as acts of sewing: «In mirroring, our gaze serves as a sewing thread, bouncing back and forth, penetrating oneself and the other self, reconnecting ourselves to reality and fantasy.» (Kimsooja in conversation with Olivia Maria Rubio, 2006).

In *To Breathe – Zurich*, the viewers are simultaneously reflectors and reflected; their gaze becomes a form of sewing. Kimsooja has withdrawn her body from the «image». If in *A Needle Woman*, the back view of the figure served as a figure of identification, that function is now filled by the empty interior space. For Kimsooja, it is the presence of the void that allows the viewers to enter her body like a substitute: «My practice has been increasingly dematerializing since the early days until now. My ultimate goal as an artist is to be liberated from materiality, including my body.» (Kimsooja in conversation with Frank Gautherot).

To Breathe – Zurich is a continuation of the series of work *To Breathe*, which Kimsooja first exhibited as *To Breathe – A Mirror Woman* at the Palacio de Cristal in Madrid in 2006. In 2013 she realised *To Breathe: Bottari* for the Korean Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, in 2016 *To Breathe* at MMCA (National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art) in Seoul, and another version in 2019 in Poitiers in France.