

TRANSBOUNDARY AESTHETICS IN CONTEMPORARY KOREAN WOMEN ARTISTS¹
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Koreans know much about borders and boundaries from their recent 20th century history. On the one hand, there is the almost only extant reminder of the *Cold War* in the artificial Parallel 36 division of the peninsula; a physical and political division into two political entities that has given rise to so much human suffering, which is still going on; on the other, women have been particularly subject to experiencing borders in the form of hierarchical power relations from time immemorial in almost any geographical and historical moment and the Confucian values of Korean traditional society is not only no exception but may even be considered as particularly strict case of this gender oppression. Korean women, thus, may be thought of as particularly sensitive to borders in various ways. Taking into consideration these two distinct premises, maybe it could be suggested that a transboundary aesthetic can easily evolve as a form of questioning borders in a country such as South Korea and in the works of two women artists who have grown under both above mentioned conditioning factors.

As the image shown on the screen of a female silhouette's back facing us [slide 1] may suggest, the position of the "aesthetic subject" generated in the 18th century Western European debate of aesthetics, understood of a male, middle class Western European individual, could be challenged nowadays "turning a *female back*" on the viewer and instead inviting to the quiet contemplation of slowly moving gray waters, the waters of the Yamuna river, an Indian river with the name of a hindu Goddess; in this performance, Korean artist Kimsooja (Daegu, 1957) observed from the perspective of non-Western woman. This image belongs to a video-performance the artist undertook in 2000, consisting of a standing still camera filming from behind her back while she watched still the slowly subtly moving waters of this river.

We may think indeed that, at least in the level of intellectual aesthetic debates, we have long left behind the male *voyeur way of seeing*, echoing John Berger's expression when he approached the female nude in his celebrated work of 1971 *Ways of Seeing*. But have we really done so?

Today, as I try to show with this initial image of Kimsooja, maybe its way time to go a step beyond from the rich cultural *milieu* of a preeminent non-Western cultural tradition as the East-Asian one, and from a feminine position within it, as I try to show here, by selecting the works of two Korean women artists who are currently active.

The structure of my presentation is as follows [slide 2]. First I will try to correlate feminism, global aesthetics and the notion of "transboundary" in broad terms, under three aspects. Then I will focus on these two Korean female artists, Kimsooja and Yeesoogyung, active since the early nineties and among the most international Korean women artists, particularly Kimsooja.

Seminal ideas for my enquiry can be found [slide 3] in an interview another colleague and I made to Kimsooja in 2016, which appeared published in Spanish in a journal where I also translated a recent article by Carolyn Korsmeyer, reknown

¹ I gratefully acknowledge the financial support granted to me by the University of Malaga (I Plan Propio de Investigación and Andalucía Tech) which made possible my participation in this congress with this paper.

philosopher and feminist aesthetician. There she tried to assess the artistic production of last decade in the feminist art movement stating that somehow the vindications of the first feminist waves in the artworld no longer make sense due to the big changes in the artworld itself and that maybe some deeper reflection was needed on the grounds of the proper modern European art system on whose basis still our art system relies².

It is in this connection [slide 4] that I want to remember Larry Shiner, an author frequently quoted by Korsmeyer herself, and by myself in many of my writings as a departing point. In 2003, in *The Invention of Art* he already warns us about the lack of a deeper radicalism of many feminist claims, which may be particularly flagrant when in a patriarchal imperialistic attitude we try to assimilate non-Western understanding of the arts into our systems of art and aesthetics. There we can read:

“If women’s needlework has been rescued from the dungeon of ‘domestic art’ to enter the main floor of our art museums, it is partly because pressure from the women’s movement finally overcame a long standing gender bias of the fine art system. So long as the modern system of art remains the established norm, feminist insistence on getting women into art institutions is certainly the order of the day. Yet women should not be satisfied with just getting ‘into’ art but should recognize that fine art assumptions themselves have been gendered from the beginning and need to be fundamentally reshaped.

Similarly, the multiculturalist movement is right to want the genres and works of excluded minorities to enter the literary, art and music curricula, yet the very success of this effort could end up reinforcing the imperial claims of the Euro-American system of the fine arts unless we critique its underlying divisions. Instead of simply assimilating the arts of traditional African or Native American cultures to European norms in the patronizing belief that we pay them a compliment, we need to learn from their very different understanding of the arts and their place in society”³

Delving deeper into Shiner’s critique of the modern European system of the fine arts, which in his view is still widely pervasive in its spirit despite its multifarious attempts to challenge it, I found that Korsmeyer notion of “deep gender” could prove a useful premise in order to ponder and evaluate Eastern arts and their philosophical/ conceptual framework. In her own terms: at the deepest level of gender significance lie entire conceptual frameworks that are founded on presumptions whose connection with gendered ways of thinking is by no means immediately evident. Here gender resonance is slant and opaque, and explicit references to masculinity and femininity are likely to be altogether absent (...) We might call this ‘deep gender’”⁴.

Despite the patriarchal oppression of women in East Asian cultures, which is an undeniable fact from ancient times to today, corroborated by classical Confucian texts particularly, it is equally true that the traditional conception of art as a process or way (*dao*) and the philosophical dynamism between opposed complementary notions (such as *yin/yang*) account for an entirely different conceptual framework in which arts are generally more linked to practice, self-cultivation and everyday life; even the exaltation

² V. Fernández Gómez, Rosa y Fernández del Campo, Eva (2018), “Envolver el mundo con el ojo de una aguja. Una conversación con Kimsooja”, en: *Anales de Historia del Arte*, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, vol. 28, Special Issue “Historias del arte en femenino”, pp.47-55; Carolyn Korsmeyer *Wild effervescences: a retrospective look at feminist art*, in *Anales de Historia del Arte*, vol. 28, pp. 29-45.

³ Larry Shiner, *The Invention of Art. A Cultural History*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003, p. 7

⁴ Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Gender and Aesthetics*, London: Routledge, 2004, p. 3.

of the so-called “arts of the brush” (painting-poetry-calligraphy) due to the fact that they were normally practiced at home (even if in a special room), help explain the fact that women of the elite classes had more access to these arts than their European counterparts had to our homologue *fine arts* (painting / sculpture); equally the natural motives traditionally chosen as topics for poems/paintings (plants and animals) are indeed closer to the *still life* genre in European oil painting, topics that indeed wealthy women could choose for their painting hobbies.

It is in this sense, that in my view many of the arts and aesthetic notions of Asian cultures, share features we normally label as feminine in the West. For example, I find significant the traditional East Asian deep appreciation of what in the European system of the arts, after the 18th century we consider part of the crafts (pottery and other crafts related to clothing, with materials as important and refined as porcelain or silk, for example). Indeed, these two elaborate materials and accompanying techniques will be chosen by these two women artists I will mention.

In a volume about global feminisms in art history, a monographic article about feminist art in Asia, by Joan Kee, opened with the following provocative question: “Is the notion of a ‘contemporary Asian women’s art’ necessarily feminist in nature?”⁵

My reflection here attempts to deal with the complexity of this question, with the necessary clarification that to talk about “Asianness” or in my case, “Koreanness” in essentialistic terms would be a simplifying reductionism conducive to the classical stereotypes used ideologically in geopolitical agendas.

On the other hand, let me briefly refer to the notion of transboundary. It is a term widely used nowadays in connection with discourses on identity, globalization and mobility and the heavily hybridized condition of our cultures and societies. A connection with gender issues comes from the fact that boundaries are normally defined in binary terms and often times charged with negative connotations of power relations.

But it could also be more neutral or even positive if we rely on, for example, transculturality’s definition by authors currently participating in this IAA congress, such as Krystina Wilkożeska or Giuseppe Patella⁶. These two authors refer to relational networks of complementary elements, following the example of the rhizome and ecosystem and visually the one of the bridge, in virtue of which what divides and sets apart is at the same time what connects and keeps together thanks to the generated open space. So, this dialectics of opposed elements, which do not come into conflict in terms of power relations but which transform into one another dynamically, is what has inspired me to follow and interpret these two Korean Women artists works in this light.

Jin Whi-yeon in her monography on contemporary Korean women artists, where these two artists are included, states that somehow Korean artists through the notion of

⁵ Joan Kee, “What is Feminist About Contemporary Asian Women’s Art?”, in M. Reilly and L. Nochlin (eds.), *Global Feminisms. New Directions in Contemporary Art*, London, New York: Merrel, 2007, p. 107.

⁶ Patella, Giuseppe (2015). “Aesthetics and ‘transcultural’ turn”, en *Laocoonte. Revista de Estética y Teoría de las Artes*. Vol. 2. Nº 2, pp. 133-143. Wilkożewska, Krystina (2013). “Transcultural studies in Aesthetics”, en De Mul, Jos and Van De Vall, Renée (eds.). *Gimme Shelter. Global Discourses in Aesthetics*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam U.P., pp. 81-88.

simultaneous transboundary overcome Western epistemological premises on “hard-to-define” categories. She distinguishes ambivalence from coexistence or ambi-existence, in the sense that the latter allows for the coexistence of opposites where there is no refutation or resistance. She says: “while the Western concept of ambivalence is the simultaneity of differences based on the premise of contradiction, the concept is the duality of acceptance, coexisting without contradiction in Korea. Mulberry paper has served as the medium for combining/dividing space, and for blocking/transmitting light, wind, air and sound, long providing Korean culture with the underlying experience of the transboundary, a state of being open to outside elements”⁷. In connection with the above, the author considers that Korean women artists, compared to their male counterparts, have a higher ability for accepting and recognizing subtle differences and expressing them with their works.

And maybe [slide 6] in order to be and remain open to outside elements, to act as channels or bridges of exchange so to say, after so many centuries of frontally pleasing poses, it has come the moment for women to turn their back on the image viewers, de-constructing the subservient position of so many centuries.

These three images have something in common: a human silhouette which looks back on the viewer of the image. Whereas the one on the left, Caspar David Friedrich’s *The Wanderer*, could be interpreted from a feminist point of view as epitomizing the sublime, a historically much gendered bypassed aesthetic category, the other two, by these two women artists, may initially seem sort of disrespectful to the viewer, showing unconcern, disregard, or evoke some mystery, but in any case, they are far from the pleasing postures traditionally ascribed to women in the canon of European classical oil painting. The painting on the right, by Yeesoogyung, described in the tradition of medieval Goryeo dynasty Buddhist silk paintings, represents a bodhisattva (Avalokitesvara or Gwangyin) which, in Buddhist iconography is commonly seen as androgynous.

So, let me briefly introduce these two artists, which are just six years apart [slide 7]. Kimsooja is considered one of the 10 Korean living artists with a more international projection and definitely the most international Korean woman artist today; she is also known as a nomadic artist, something that she traces to her childhood and her family having to move frequently between cities in South Korea. Her career started in the late eighties but from the 90’s onwards has been very much linked to her moving to New York and has exhibited widely all over the world.

On the other hand, Yeesoogyung, also graduated from a Korean University but has always considered herself as a “local artist”, drawing inspiration heavily from Korean traditional culture and art.

In the case of each artist [slide 8], I have chosen to focus on some specific series of works and projects, mainly due to the materials, techniques and traditional arts involved, which have been traditionally associated with women and in the case of the Western art system, understood more closely related to crafts and to everyday life. For Kimsooja, I focus on her series *Bottari Truck*, *A Needle Woman* and *A Laundry Woman* and the main medium and technique invoked would be pieces of cloth and sewing. In the case of Yeesoogyung, I have selected her series *Translated Vases*, which she started in the late nineties and have continued for the last two decades, having ceramics as a medium. In these series of both artists the notion of patchwork and the recycling and re-use of left-overs as an epitome

⁷ Jin Whi-yeon, *Coexisting differences. Women Artists in Contemporary Korean Art*, Seoul: Hollym, 2012, p. 156.

of what an artwork is, abounds in both artists works. In the case of Yeesoookyung *Translated Vase series*, she composes new pieces gluing together with the shards rejected by Korean potters who, in their pursuit for the perfect vase, break and throw away the pieces that, after being fired, fail to meet their extremely high standards.

As I said before, in these two examples, we have the duality of a preexistent condition (the used piece of cloth, the ceramic pots) which through the act of wrapping and unwrapping for the piece of cloth, and breaking and mending or repairing for the ceramic piece, result both of them in a new totality/identity made out of fragments which are put together.

And, as this patch-work by Kimsooja [slide 9], whose eloquent title is *Portrait of Yourself*, it may be the case that these two women's sense of self-identity, as shown in their works, is nurtured more from a transcultural feminine wisdom about our own human fragility and vulnerability as human beings, a value habitually ascribed to women but also in more generic terms associated to East Asian cultures, where perishability and the questioning of the self in individualistic terms are central issues.

To continue a bit more with Kimsooja [slide 10], I will focus on her first two decades of work, where needlework, clothes and the connection of art with everyday life are central. She explains her own initial inspiration in the early eighties making clear that her inspiration came from her everyday life activities linked to the feminine world of fabrics, the act of sewing (with the needle penetrating in and out the fabric of bedcovers, which have to be sown every time they are cleaned. She describes thus her initial inspiration for choosing cloth and sewing as a part of her artistic language:

*"One day while sewing a bedcover with my mother, I had a surprising experience in which my thought, sensibility, and action at that moment all seemed to converge. And I discovered new possibilities for conveying buried memories and pain, as well as life's quiet passions. I was fascinated by the fundamental orthogonal structure of the cloths, the needle and thread moving through the plane surface, the emotive and evocative power of colorful traditional cloths."*⁸.

Then, a decade after, in 1993 she refers again to the experience of putting a needle into a silky fabric and having the feeling "like my head was hit by a thunderbolt and I felt like the whole energy of the universe passed through my body to this needle point through the fabric" and so that's how she discovered the structure she was looking for, and, she goes on, "that is how my work started just from everyday life activities".

As the artist herself explains, bedcovers symbolize many values related to the intimate world of home and housing: beds cover indeed the whole cycle of life as they are the site where people are born, make love, suffer illness and finally come to die. In 1992, while working at her PS 1 studio at New York she had a second revelation, when she looked at a bundle of her own stuff (belongings) packed in a traditional Korean way, with a traditional bedcover, called *bottari* in Korean language.

⁸ Kimsooja, "Artist's Note," Kimsooja, exhibition catalogue, Gallery Hyundai, Seoul, 1988, p.9. [Retrieved on 02.15.2019 from: <http://www.kimsooja.com/texts/tae.html>]

So that realization again was the source for a new series, the *bottari* series that is still going on [slide 11], as we can see in the 2016 *bottari* with a Guatemala bedcover, and the performance project *Cities on the move*, in which she travelled to different cities in the world, on top of a truck filled with *bottaris*, pieces of bedcovers wrapping used clothes. Here we see a picture of her in Berlin, with the *Grossern Stern* on the background. Again, as a documentary reflection of her performance, she chooses to show her back instead of her front, reinforcing thus the feeling of anonymity and of fusion with the crowd from a state of indeterminacy and detachment very much akin to the self-less states pursued through meditative practices.

Also, importantly, as the artist also remarks, in Korean language, as in many others, there is the expression “to make one’s bundle”, which in the case of women it also has the meaning of abandoning the assigned traditional roles within the family and the home’s confines and go out to live one’s own life...

In the late nineties, the meaning of sewing became more conceptual and less literal, when she conceived the video-performance series *A Needle Woman* and *A Laundry Woman* [slide 12]. She travelled around big metropolis in the world (Delhi, Tokyo, Mexico City, Shanghai) and stood still, like a needle fixed, itching the ground, in the middle of busy streets, with a fix camera recording her back, while many people passed her by. In our interview to her, we made the comparison of her witnessing eyes with the eye of the needle, and the eye of the camera too, which through the act of registering and recording passersby’s presence acted as a weaving/sewing action, connecting people’s lives in that very *here and now* performance. A registering process in a neutral non-judgmental manner, based on a self-emptying meditative state which the eye of the needle being a hole perfectly represents.

In the case of Yeesoookyung [slide 13], I have chosen her most representative works with ceramics for the obvious association again of vases to hold plants and tableware with the feminine world, particularly in the Western world –though not so much in East-Asia, as I earlier mentioned; in East-Asia, again, particularly vases designed to hold plants and flower arrangements, i.e. *ikebana* in Japan, where originally highly regarded and practiced by men, as is the case of the famous tea master Sen-no-Rikyu, and not associated with feminine values as opposed to masculine ones.

Also, I have chosen the series *Translated Vase* because, as in the case of Kimsooja, Yeesoookyung selects fragments of already used and discarded materials, ceramic shards in this case, to create a new entity, a sort of bizarre sculptural body, of again an assemblage patchwork style structure that follows no predetermined pattern. She also started her *Translated Vase* at the late nineties, involving a global scenario but departing her inspiration from the tradition of pottery, which is very strong and important in Korea.

Yeesoookyung discovered that, as in the old days, still contemporary Korean potters, trying to emulate past celebrated pieces of Goryeo dynasty celadon and Joseon dynasty porcelain, discarded pieces breaking them right after coming out of the oven for the minutest, hardly imperceptible imperfections.

So, she took these rejected ceramic shards, coming from a wide range of ceramic pieces (celadon, white or blue and white porcelain, underwear copper red or steel brown, etc.) and pasted the pieces together with a potent epoxy adhesive, applying onto the adhesive

gold powder in multiple layers. Through a complex process that may last until four months she creates a new, stronger and durable piece, out of these discarded fragments.

The artist explains that the idea to use gold powder came from a pun, since in Korean language the term “geum” has two meanings: “crack or line”, and “gold” [slide 14]. Of course, to those acquainted with traditional Japanese ceramics in particular, it may come to mind the practice of *kintsugi*, or mended ceramics, whose glued junctures are proudly showed covered also with gold powder. Some of these initial Japanese *kintsugi* pieces of the late 17th century were interestingly the *buncheong ware* Korean vases used for the Japanese tea ceremony.

In 2015 [slide 15], Yeesoookyung showed an installation with her translated vases pieces and titled *When I become you*, and suggesting, in my view, through the imposing physical and special presence of those conjoint figures, how identity is always a negotiation and an exchange between the within and without, the inner self and the outer atmosphere, with the apparently capricious shapes meaning to say that this identity always escapes our rational and controlling level of analysis and interpretation.

The last work of Yeesoookyung that I chose is *Portable temple* [slide 16], where once again, a traditional Korean artistic medium is selected, the tradition of Buddhist painting of Goryeo dynasty on folding screens. The work portrays five silouhettes, in this case, unlike Kimsooja, not the artist herself as an anonymous same/other, but images of religious Buddhist icons, portrayed showing their back to the spectator, as if, once again, wanting to make us reflect upon the other side of the story, usually hidden but equally supporting and complementary to the official version.

It is a six panels folding screen, having 5 religious figures represented in the inside, whereas on the outside the five colors traditional of East Asian cosmology are present one in each panel. When the folding screen is unfolded it forms an hexagon in whose interior there is space just for a single person; this person, when inside the *portable temple*, would be facing the back of those icons, having thus the effect of self-identification with the deities themselves, thanks to the typical association through self-projection with the iconic images. This contrasts with what has been traditional in the original Buddhist Goryeo paintings that Yeesoookyung tries to emulate formally with her work, showing deference and showing also differences in the social scale through the size of the portrayed figures.

Viewing these works in traditional European settings such as the castle of Oranienbaum, in Dessau (Germany) [slide 17] is also striking, particularly in the case of the ceramics for the silk route reminiscences and the strong association of East-Asian porcelain ware, *china*, as a luxury item of European aristocracy.

In conclusion [slide 18], with these works of Kimsooja and Yeesoookyung I have wanted to reflect upon what in my view may seem interesting contrasts and intersections between transcultural and gender aesthetics.

1st. about deep gender issues, regarding differences in the categorization of art genres and art materials (silk, porcelain, clothe makings and ceramic vases) between East-Asian and European traditional cultures.

2nd. About the notion of identity, where through the simultaneous affirmation of opposing qualities and thus transcending boundaries, a new sense of more hybridized and rich identity is affirmed, an identity where [slide 19] through a gesture of turning our backs on the individual self, we may embrace a deeper and wider sense of belonging together through our common celebration of the scars (be they in the form of shards or scraps) that show our common vulnerability as the base of our collective supra-individual strength.

Thank you.