**Catherine Dormor**

**The Seamstress and the Traveller: art practice as generous encounter**

The concept of space and its occupation is one traditionally loaded with assumptions. Notions such as public/domestic, centre/edge, inside/outside suggest a sharpened division of the global realm, which could be considered to have been built upon patriarchal occupying strategies, from the local, most often considered in terms of the feminine. Here, I want to explore occupation as a theme articulated and challenged through women’s art practices, re-positioning the discussion around notions of generosity and collaboration.

Marsha Meskimmon (2013, 7) suggests that the agency of art-making operates as a form of precarious ecology, an idea that she explores through the work of Polish artist Joanna Rajkowska’s *Soon Everything Will Change* (2014) In this work, the artist journeys a Brazilian crystal to the UK, establishing it as form of seaming device as it makes the journey. Rajkowska disrupts space that is built upon ownership and power, suggesting generous encounter as a cosmopolitan space with the potential to shift and change.

In this paper, I want to open out these ideas of communality and collaboration through a participative dialogue between texts, artworks and voices to consider the notion of such tactics of artmaking as a necessarily precarious ecology but one with the potential to challenge and remodel concepts of space.

This will be addressed through three themes: the traveller , the storyteller and the seamstress: producers of space, who bring together the material, the virtual, the metaphorical and the visual. Works by artists Kimsooja (*A Needle Woman* (2006)) and Kirstie Macleod (*Barocco* (2014)) and Chiharu Shiota’s *The Key in the Hand* (2015) will be considered as a way by which to explore the potential for thinking-through-seaming as a form of cosmopolitan practice. This paper will frame Meskimmon’s cosmopolitan embodied belonging as ecology in terms of a mode of practice which exists in each moment of encounter between needle, thread and cloth - as and how they connect and pass *through* each other.

Thus traveller and seamstress together offer a means by which to contest binary thinking and enable free passage through to a spatial strategy that is built upon opening *out* and *onto* others in mutual exchange.

**Art & Citizenship: cosmopolitan belonging within space**

**The Seamstress and the Traveller: art practice as generous encounter**

The concept of belonging often conjures up the notion of a community, the comfort of which is physical, emotional and metaphysical. It is concerned with being integrated and in that sense of placing others outside of that community, albeit tacitly and possibly unknowingly.

Marsha Meskimmon, in her introduction to *Contemporary Art and the Cosmopolitan Imagination* (2011) asks ‘who inhabits a global home?’ (p.6), a question she frames in terms of community as space and subjects, mutually and repeatedly constructed through dialogic and dynamic exchange. In this she suggests a reconceiving of subjectivity beyond such notions of membership and thus non-membership and the expressly or tacitly implicated exclusion from community. For Meskimmon, and forming a framework for thinking here, the articulation of such a space of and for community suggests a mode for thinking and materialising subjects-in-progress.

Here Meskimmon offers the term be(long)ing as a concept for thinking through these complications and implications, suggesting this is a form of cosmopolitanism that is first and foremost ‘grounded, materially specific and relational’(p.6). In this sense she folds together the two terms belonging and being and thus hospitality and dwelling.

Such a re-framing of cosmopolitanism considers and challenges centric forms of belonging, locating the edges as spaces for ‘opening ourselves to others through imaginative engagement rather than through assimilation.’ (p.7) Such a model takes as its starting point Kwame Anthony Appiah’s conversation – a thinking from the other’s perspective that necessitates an imaginative, creative shift from the subject: an aesthetics and ethics of openness towards.

Thus Meskimmon’s cosmopolitan belonging carries with it resonances of Luce Irigaray’s call for a form of inter-subjectivity that is not predicated upon commodification and thus objectification of the other, but rather on opening out and onto that other. In both her title and repeated phrase ‘I Love to You’, Irigaray relocates the ‘you’ not as the object of *my*  desire, but sets the ‘love’ as an active verb, thus promoting each participant as a subject.

In this Irigaray proposes a mode of be(long)ing with other people that simultaneously builds outwards through and towards communication: a horizontal model of exchange that is thus intersubjective. This models ‘opens up a present in order to construct a future’ (ref). Such a way of thinking through communication firstly stresses the prefix ‘com’ = withness of that act, but in so doing it recognises the I, You and We in the relationship as concomitant partners.

‘I recognise you signifies that you are different from me, that I cannot identify myself (with) not master your becoming. I will never be your master. And it is this negative that enables me to go toward you.’ (ref)

Thus the ‘to’ in ‘I Love to You’ becomes a site of non-reduction of you to an object of my desire, but retains you as another desiring collaborator in the relationship we are building together.

And so, returning to Appiah:

‘Conversations across boundaries of identity – whether national, religious or something else – begin with the sort of imaginative engagement you get when you read a novel or watch a movie or attend to a work of art that speaks from some place rather than your own.’

(Appiah, 2006. P.85)

This imaginative leap, or conversation, is the activating of love toward the other – an aesthetic of openness.

Such a way of thinking and constructing community can be conceived in terms of two traditions of monks of both the East and the Wests: there are those that become a monastic community, settled and bounded in a space of and for spiritual contemplation. On the other hand, there is another tradition of nomadic monasticism, whose members travel between locations (often monasteries and holy sites), making their journey, perhaps their pilgrimage, according to a pre-planned route or one built upon a particular tradition. In this way they become as if ‘strangers to the world’ (*xeniteia)*, seeking out the edges, shifting their locus of be(long)ing from the comfort, security and boundedness of a fixed community to the discomfort, insecurity and freedom of nomadism.

Whilst both of these acts are focused and routed in notions of faithfulness and devotion to God, these two models offer ways for thinking about community and Appiah’s imaginative leap. Where the former, monastery-bound, group create a locus for their members, a site and space for community and communication, with a very physical emphasis upon the notion of *being with*, the nomadic group offer an inversion of that locus. In their public act of movement between (and away from) sites, they turn that private contemplation towards the world – performing it, breaking the norms and opening themselves onto the potentiality of the world: together with the insecurity that that entails. Appiah’s act of imagination set physically.

In this paper, I want to consider the idea of cross-centric be(long)ing, taking Meskimmon’s term, Irigaray’s ‘to’ and Appiah’s imaginative leap as starting points for thinking, and extending this to consider three artworks. The first of these is Kimsooja’s *A Needle Woman* (1999-2006), an ongoing performance in which the artist sets her body as an axis or locus of be(long)ing, standing or lying within open landscapes and city streets. Kimsooja allows people, wind and time to pass around her, sometimes disappearing from view to emerge again with all of the uncertainty that that offers.

The second artwork is *Barocco* (2009-19) is a decade-long embroidery project by British artist Kirstie Macleod that is centred around a single red dress. Since 2009, the dress has travelled around the world being continuously embroidered and added to by 50 different participants to date. Its most recent contributors include the Bedouin Fanasina collective, a group of female embroiderers based in Egypt’s Sinai who provide economic independence and education to women in the region. Taken from the ancient Portuguese word for a “rough or imperfect pearl”, Baroccois a performance piece where Kirstie Macleod sits within a central perspex cube wearing and embroidering the ornate red dress that fills the tiny space around her.

Over the remaining five years, elements of Barocco will be worked on and over by embroiderers around the globe until the dress is so heavily decorated that the dress and its bodice will be able to stand up on its own as a sculptural exhibit within its Perspex cube. Individually delicate and decorative, the unique stitches by people all over the world add the layers and layers of expression that create the strong and rigid armour of the art piece that is the Barocco dress. The piece makes tangible the interplay through embroidery between a variety of cultures, each with their own identity and experience, who express themselves through their stitches.

The final port of call, will be Chiharu Shiota’s recent installation *The Key in the Hand* (2015), which featured in the Japanese Pavilion for the Venice Biennale 2015. Upon entering the gallery space the viewer is confronted by a seemingly impermeable web of red threads, but a passage way through quickly becomes apparent and each thread reveals a key attached to it and the boats that are caught, seemingly mid-journey, within the web. Thought about in terms of the traveller, this work with its collection of keys donated to Shiota from around the world, offers a form of community that is built upon trust and the ability to move freely within that community. *The Key in the hand offers* to transcend national, cultural, linguistic and political boundaries, emotionally arousing a sense of Meskimmon’s be(long)ing within its countless visitors from all over the world.

**I want to tell you a story – or perhaps three stories, but then again, maybe it’s only one?**

A woman sits stitching a dress for a special party. She has selected the pattern after much poring through the large hard-cover books in the shop, first selecting one with a long, fitted skirt, then switching her attentions to the one with the elegant neckline, before finally deciding upon the fishtail skirt and fitted bodice design, imagining herself dancing and the movement of her hips being emphasised by the shape and fit of that skirt.

As needle and thread pass to and fro between the layers of the fabric she is carefully stitching, so she feels the weight and flex of the red silk satin with just a touch of elastane so that it will move and sway with her body, shimmer and shine in the evening light. The seamstress looks forward and back to the other options, to the evening event to come and back into focus comes the fabric and the placing of each stitch.

Needle and thread move between layers of fabric, bringing them firmly together in the action and activity of making the seams. They turn flat pieces of fabric into the moving, swaying garment on the woman’s dancing, swaying hips. Needle and thread graft sleeve onto bodice, bodice onto skirt, zip onto opening and so bring individual elements together to form a communal whole.

‘she is a needle, barometer, seismograph and compass, she seems to be doing more than just personifying time and space, she is also indicating the everyday dramas that usually go undetected in our habit-formed lives. The social fabric has now become her material. Her gown is as grey as the dusty road, her presence evolves into silent, physical testimony,’

(von Drathen, 2006, p.37)

And so the needle becomes a nomad, an existence beyond the organised space of the cloth, but bound up within it in the sense that the nomad has a territory, customary paths, moving from point to point (water points, dwelling points, meeting points and so on). But where for the sedentary or static dweller, the points determine the paths, the nomadic way reverses this focus and the paths subordinate the points. For the seamstress, then, the pattern choosing, fabric and evening event are the points to her stitching paths – her needle, thread and stitching hands are her way of being between these points, her goal or main attention is to continue to move within and the process of creation prioritises itself over the finished garment or event for which it is intended.

Kimsooja called herself *Needle Woman* in her ongoing performance work from 1999 to the present day. Sometimes horizontally, sometimes vertically, she sets her body as needle and thread passing through the fabric: this fabric is the entire space of her surroundings, the world she observes and experiences. And so, the work becomes the seam, the threshold and turning point across the surface of the garment, shaped and manipulated in its joining to enable that body within to move and sway to the music.

The music of *Needle Woman* is not the rhythmic beat of a band, nor the heaving bass of a club, but that of the city, the river and the breeze: of her environment, but it is silenced in her footage and we can only read it through the visuals. Her dancing is her movement in relationship with that environment, or as she puts it:

‘A line is the physical expression of movement in time. And through this movement space is also opened up …’

And so in shifting to the nomadic path-point-path framework for thinking, Kimsooja opens up a changed notion of movement in which her stilled body becomes the barometer or metronome marking time.

As needle and thread pass to and fro between the pieces of cloth, forming the dancing dress, so the cloth passes over and u der that needle and thread, moving between fabric and garment, weaving and dancing, body and body, forming a seam or join and a threshold across time and space, acting as witness in the midst:

‘Here she becomes a needle that gauges reality, a clock hand registering the events of our time.’

(von Drathen, 2006, p.39)

But in this role *A Needle Woman* also embodies the nomadic passing: a be(long)ing in the world.

**The Storyteller**

The journey always begins with packing. Selecting and deciding, choosing, unchoosing and re-choosing: this one or that one, which of these, two or three of these? Have I enough? Have I too much? Will it all fit? Do I need it all? I want choice, but need to be able to carry it.

And so the story teller sets out on a journey, seeking new experiences, new views of the world to bring back and share: things and people seen, heard, smelled, heard of, just missed, imagined and realised, imagined and never found … Layer upon layer, fragments gathered together for later reflection, contemplation and telling.

Each telling of the journey is an act of repeating, fragmenting, joining and embellishing – it is *all* in the telling. But it is also *all* in the hearing as these fragments and parts of fragments and partly joined fragments embed themselves in the listener, assimilated now into their story.

Thus the fragments form a story-fabric – each on being brought into be(long)ing through its own performance, a performance that relies on exchange between storyteller and listener – their *com*panionship.

And so the packing, and the journeying and the experience of that journey become entwined: the activity of sifting and selecting, the telling and re-telling intertwine.

The embroiderer sits within her glass box, clothed in a multi-layered red, silk dress, stitching and embellishing that same dress on over fifty different occasions, in over fifty different locations. As this travelling, active, growing work makes its journey, Kirstie Macleod’s dress becomes storyteller and listener: leaving traces of its presence through photographs, documentation and memories of those who have worn and stitched, viewed and curated, packed and unwrapped, heard and read of it: all have travelled with it. The dress too, as it journeys between people and places, changes and grows, carrying marks of its journeys and the journey-creators. This dress becomes storyteller, story-fabric, needle and thread, changed and changing throughout its journey and journeying.

Such a mode of production is about the *com-* or with of companionship – collaborative and collective – generous encounter built upon opening out and onto – openness.

Activation – authorship – community

50 embroiderers, 15 countries, 1 dress

**The Traveller**

And so, the red silk dress is placed on the top of the open suitcase, ready to be secured with the other necessities for the journey, the last to be packed the first to be unpacked on arrival, to reduce its creases and to be prepared for the event – a very special cargo.

Luggage, suitcase, rucksack, bag – all signify movement, the unbounded space of travel, containers, safekeepers, in the midst of destabilised existence. Hamid Naficy notes:

‘every journey entails a return, or the thought of return. Therefore, home and travel, placement and displacement are always already intertwined. Return occupies a primary place in the minds of the [traveller].’

(Naficy, 2001, p.229)

Such images and imaginings of homecoming are built upon nostalgia and fantasy as they short circuit the experience and the changes that that travelling bring about – the moss that does indeed gather on that rolling stone.

Japanese artist Chiharu Shiota takes us on a journey, the point from which we set sail unknown – perhaps it is her Berlin residence, her Japanese family home, the Japanese Pavilion in Venice, perhaps somewhere else. In Venice was installed a large web of red threads, encompassing and trapping a boat and an uncountable number of keys. Already the suitcase feels loaded – Japan-born artist, Berlin resident, keys donated from across the world – *The Key in the Hand* shifts from a title to a promised truth.

In this installation, the objects (boat and keys) trap and are in turn trapped, representing memories, opportunities and hope. Keys offer the promise of entry. What lies beyond? The boat, too, offers the journey, the return, the connecting of people across time and space, rough seas and becalmed waters.

Here is the travellers’ tale – the departures, arrivals, displacement and retrouvement – with each a new key takes centre stage: embellishing and cutting away through the web of connections.

From this living, breathing, moving red web or sea of threads, the boat travels. In Shiota’s other works this is a global journey. *After the Dream* travels - to London, Paris, Seoul, Birmingham, Nagoya – and as it journeys it shifts and changes according to its installation site. In London, a circle, in Paris a procession, in Birmingham a line, in Nagoya and Seoul a line again. The dress dances its slow Pavane between and in each site – it is site senstitive, carrying something of each place with it to its next staging post. Like a messenger, it moves between, communicates between, offers the ‘to’ within the relationships forged.

Even when installed, there is something contingent, precarious in Shiota’s installations – they appear to be awaiting instructions for packing and travel – like the traveller herself, they draw meaning from their context, they give meaning to their context … *The Key in the Hand*

Shiota uses the concept of entrapment and mass communication, inserting these notions into each new space as a means by which to initiate public possibility, to open up a space for considering relationship with a place, to temporarily transform that place through drawing people to it, together as community. She draws attention to the relations *between* individuals – their generous encounter one with another.

And so, with each journey, each new point of arrival and departure, the boat, the keys, the threads and the dresses leave their traces. Like Macleod’s dress, this is in the form of the photos, the videos, the performances and conversations that surround it in each place and in the memories and relationships created/secured/cemented there. These travel together with the work – sometimes ahead of it as messengers, sometimes the installation does not make the same physical journey as these – plans change, plans fall through, sometimes a new site has little pre-warning, sometimes it becomes part of something else.

The traveller returns to her packing and re-packing of her dress, together with her belongings littered around her hotel room, making space for additions – gifts, purchases and the ephemeral of travel, whilst also subtractions – tights laddered, tissues used, a scarf dropped and lost, gifts given. Each re-packing of the case results in a different set of inter-relationships within the case – dirty and worn clothes separated from the clean, different space-saving tricks deployed – carefully folded items now squeezed into shoes.

Travelling balances or hovers between the absolutely immediate and significantly delayed. The immediate lies in the unscripted, unplanned interactions in the moment – between artist and public, public and threads, artist and keys. The delay is in the spread of knowledge about the work – the press releases, the advance planning, the images, the recalled encounters, the critiques and reviews.

As the traveller, sometimes the immediate of this point coalesces or collides with the delay of the previous/next – the red silk dress packed with last night’s pyjamas hastily stuffed in alongside, Shiota’s red threads, keys and boat as part of the Venice Biennale 2015, with all the accompanying residue of Birmingham, Berlin, Japan, Seoul, and of course, *Venice 2013, 2011, 2009, 2017 …*. *The Key in the Hand* – but what will it open, what will it secure?

And so, the traveller and the seamstress, together with the storyteller, return home – they arrived having added to their story-fabric. Through the agency of art-making they have been part of a precarious ecology – an ecology built upon exchange and encounter – an ecology that can only be changed and changing, continued, but not preserved.

As needle and thread and cloth pass *through* each other in the forming of the seam or join, so they engage in a tactical creation – opening out and onto others in mutual exchange.

**Biography:**

Catherine Dormor is an artist, research and lecturer at Middlesex University, UK. Her background is in textile as a mode of thinking-through-practice, building upon the materiality, language and processes of textile production. She exhibits internationally and has works in private and public collections. Her forthcoming text, *A Philosophy of Textile: between practice and theory* (Bloomsbury) explores the textile-based processes of seaming, fraying and folding alongside textile behaviours, namely shimmering, viscosity and caressing as a means by which to position and locate textile practice in contemporary culture.

Catherine’s thinking has increasingly become engaged with issues concerning the role of the image in the public sphere and she is shortly to launch a new postgraduate research course at Middlesex University: Visual Cultures: Practice & Activism, which addresses ways in which activist practices and tactics can be mobilised within and increasingly networked cultural realm.