

Cici
Wu

&

Yong Soon
Min

On Wednesday, April 1, 2020, we spoke with artists Cici Wu and Yong Soon Min about politics and poetics, activism and organizing in the 1980s and now, and the legacy of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's life and work. The following is an edited excerpt of our conversation.

Curators Do you think of your work as political? What does it mean to be making political work?

Cici Wu For me, making a political work means that the artist would have their own definition and consciousness towards justice first. But more importantly, artworks should actually have the potential to engage with realities—meaning, as a catalyst to create real changes in a society. That is my reflection upon what it means for an artwork to be political. However, this is not my essential concern. I would rather be more interested in imagining and practicing an artistic life that inspires people to think about politics differently.

Yong Soon Min I got stuck with the first question, because the older I've become, the more I know and the less I know. I used to quote Godard a lot because he was eminently quotable, and he was my art mentor for a while in the 1970s. He had a quote, something like, "photography is not a reflection of what is 'the real' but the reality of that reflection." I thought that this was a kind of a truth that I adhered to, especially now, more than ever before, with so much disinformation and misinformation. It's crucial for us to strive for the truth, but also to strive for truth with power. It's the search for truth in relation to power.

I was included in the exhibition at SoHo 20 that was curated by Kellie Jones in 1986 that got a positive review in *The New York Times*. I was interested in bringing these Koreans that were part of Young Koreans United (YKU), an organization based in Queens that I had been working with. The piece that I made for that exhibit, *Half Home*, I dedicated to this organization because I learned so much from

them about Korea.¹ YKU were a militant Korean organization that was closely linked to the Min Joong movement and they had a great library that I practically lived at. I couldn't read most of the books, which were in Korean, but they had some English translated books that were important to me. A group came over to the gallery and when they saw the work, there were no comments afterwards. I gathered that they were indifferent to my installation, that the work wasn't agitprop enough for them, and that they had somewhat of a narrow view of artwork that had to be useful in their activism. YKU were involved with the activist side of the Min Joong movement that was useful for the rallies and demos and so on. That was one of the first instances where I realized that the work that I show in a gallery is not necessarily for everybody. I realized that there's a limit to how much I can reach out with my work in general.

CW

I was curious about the first time you had a clear moment of political consciousness. For me, maybe I would say very clearly and strongly, it's the recent social movement in Hong Kong. It really changed me a lot. I went through many emotional moments and learned how to fight collectively. Definitely an inspiring moment for me to think about the potential of art and activism in a different spectrum, because Hong Kong doesn't have a developed discourse and vocabulary compared with New York. I started to imagine a celestial map that features different dimensions and temporalities for artists to travel. One of the dimensions is the capitalistic dimension that is constructed by museums, galleries, biennials, almost everything visible in the existing art world. But at the same time, there can be other dimensions, for example, like the Gwangju Uprising, communist movement in the Philippines, or the Hong Kong protests, and all kinds of

1 Michael Brenson, "Art: 2 Looks At Cleve Gray's Work", *The New York Times*, January 9, 1987. <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/01/09/arts/art-2-looks-at-cleve-gray-s-works.html>

small or big movements for social justice and liberation that artists have participated in. When you participate, you're still an artist, but the things that you care about and produce, the productions that you make in that dimension, are completely different. You become anonymous. These dimensions can have their own time, speed, and value. I think it's very important to try to imagine these possibilities and share them with others, slowly.

YSM

The first clear sense that the Asian American movement impacted me was in New York City post-1981, the Whitney ISP, and after my first teaching job. I'm fond of saying that I cut my political teeth on that politics, and it all happened by chance. I got this position by referral from a friend as Administrative Coordinator for Asian American Arts Alliance (which used to be called Alliance for Asian American Art & Culture before they became an official 501c3 nonprofit) that used to be on West 13th Street where the Whitney Museum now resides. It was located inside a commercial printing place called Expedi, in the Meatpacking District. I had to walk through carcasses to my office, which consisted of a desk and filing cabinet that were constantly being moved around. Each year, we organized two multi-disciplinary programs, including "Roots to Reality," but shortly after our second year other organizations, like Asian Cinevision and Pan Asian Repertory Theatre, told us that what they really need was an organization that would provide advocacy and grants, not competitive programming. So we changed our name and our mission. It opened my eyes to a lot of issues, especially how important it was to foster the development of Asian American arts broadly, and to be collaborative with other minoritized groups in actuality and in spirit. The 1980s were such an important period for people like me. It was a matter of raising consciousness about identity within a certain kind of politics that dealt with looking at the whole art scene, like the Guerrilla Girls, and grasping how little representation of women existed in the arts and likewise that

there was virtually no representation of Asian American artists. That's how Godzilla came to fruition, too, although they never became an official organization. We had some events and some shows. It was such a diverse group... a lot of artists just wanted to get together on a social basis and share work with slide slams and so on. There was another group called Seoro (meaning 'together'), which was a Korean artist group that formed in the late 1980s. We were the ones who were responsible for the exhibition at Queens Museum called, *Across the Pacific: Contemporary Art of Korean and Korean-American Artists*. We targeted the Queens Museum because Queens has the larger portion of Korean residents of all the boroughs. We also picked Jane Farber to curate Korean American artists and Young Chul Lee to curate Korean artists. Not only did the exhibition travel to Korea, but historically, it was the first instance of a Korean diaspora exhibition. Another group of artists that I became involved with were Korean artists spearheaded by Mo Bahc.² He established Minor Injury, an alternative gallery in his neighborhood, Greenpoint. He and several other people organized the show about Min Joong art that was at Artists Space in 1988. We had invited a major curator from Korea to write about this significant exhibition.³

CW How did you and Theresa [Hak Kyung Cha] know each other?

YSM Theresa and I first met in 1975 at an exhibition at the University Art Museum (now Berkeley Art Museum) we had work in as a result of both being awarded a prize. Theresa was two years older than me, but because she had double majored first in literature, then art, she graduated at the same time

² Born Bahc Chulho, Mo Bahc was his self-identified name while in New York City. Later, during his Seoul years, he became Bahc Yiso.

³ *Min Joong Art: A New Cultural Movement from Korea*, Artist Space, New York, NY, September 29–November 5, 1988. <http://old.artistsspace.org/exhibitions/ning-joong-art-a-new-cultural-moment-from-korea>.

as me with an undergraduate degree. I could tell immediately that she was so much more advanced. I mean, in the show, she showed a video while I showed etchings. We immediately latched on to one another as we were the only Koreans in that show, and in the whole art department for that matter.

She had been such a gracious person and was somebody who I respected. But at the same time, I was concerned that I was going to be sucked into her orb. I didn't want to copy her work, and I was still stubbornly trying to find my own way, my own artistic direction. So, in my work I kept my distance, but I also realized that I was very influenced by her. I also became a cinephile and started spending more and more of my time at the Pacific Film Archive. I knew most of the people, including Theresa, who worked there, so I got in for free to all the films. They had a great program of Third World Cinema as well as French New Wave. It was an amazing new world that opened up for me. I think that also influenced what I was doing, because for my thesis exhibition at the University Art Museum, I did an installation in 1979 called *Storyline* that was like a filmstrip. I know that Theresa saw the work, because afterwards she invited me to be in the annual exhibition at San Francisco Art Institute. That was also after both of our first returns to South Korea. I received a postcard from her and her brothers' trip in which she describes feeling alienated, always being stared at, and at the same time as if she was at "home." I shared that exact range of feelings and felt that she was like an older sister who I really admired.

When you ask about a community of artists in the 1980s, I wonder how her advanced artwork would reflect some of the identity politics that was very much in the air then. *Dictée* came out in 1982, and Asian American women artists and the critical sector didn't know what to make of it at first because they felt that the radical book reached out to an audience of avant-garde white artists, mostly. Then, *Writing Self, Writing Nation* came out in 1994. That was the first time that Asian

American writers and critics had spoken at a conference [about *Dictée*] and they addressed in what ways it did really reach out to them.⁴ They understood it. The book was genre defying and far-reaching in such a way that a diverse community of people ended up responding to it. There is a book recently published by Cathy Park Hong called *Minor Feelings*, where she devotes a chapter to Theresa and how [*Dictée*] spoke to her because of [Theresa's] treatment of the English language (as well as French and Korean) and how she herself struggles and plays with that language, and Cathy felt that she could really connect because she also had a strange love-hate relationship with English.

CW How do you perceive Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's position as an artist in relation to activism?

YSM If we can use *Dictée* in a speculative way, I think she would be very involved. She made an outright decision to deal with women through the structure of [*Dictée*] which consists of nine Greek muses as chapter headings as if that in itself is a feminist stance and an intervention in the face of patriarchy. Under each heading, Theresa relates real women's stories, for instance, the martyrs Joan of Arc and Yu Guan Soo, who played a central role in the Korean liberation struggle during the Japanese colonial period. She also includes stories of her mother, who's life covers the colonial period as well as the Korean War and the overthrow of South Korea's first president. Her deep knowledge about European theory as well as Korean history is paramount in her ability to elicit and poeticize about women's struggles. Her Korean background shaped her orientation to life, and I believe that she would be very supportive of movements like the Min Joong movement as it largely democratized South Korea.

⁴ See Elaine Kim and Norma Alarcon, *Writing Self, Writing Nation: A Collection of Essays on Dictée by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha*, (Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 1994).

C Cici, can you speak to us about why you were so drawn to Theresa's work? You studied filmmaking in school and much of your own work takes up a similar concern with structuralist materialist filmmaking. How has Theresa's work influenced or changed the way that you approach filmmaking?

CW I was drawn to Cha's work because I sensed familiarity. Also, I saw the difference between her and other diaspora artists in my generation. I wanted to bring her back, in a way, to provoke some reflection and re-think about how to approach cultures that were once interrupted. Perhaps it's not about her work as a result, but it's more about the way she approaches what was 'real' in those cultures. She is definitely an inspiration for a lifetime. Her influence, to me, is not limited to only one medium, such as film, but more about forming my own interpretation of deconstruction, or perceiving the film camera as a spiritual tool...

C Cici, your work as an archivist and archival researcher is a crucial part of your practice. How has Theresa's work influenced you and your archival process, and how you think about your archival work?

CW I started to work as an archivist, say, five years ago. Working as an archivist at Asia Art Archive in America opened a door to me, it was an introduction to recent art history in Asia. Because of the specific research projects that I worked on, I've especially learned more about recent Chinese art history. When I saw very interesting artworks made by artists who are no longer visible, I often imagined: what if I entered art education through studying their artworks and philosophy? At the same time, I question the archive in relation to authorship in general, meaning, the power and confinement imposed by institutions, and the human egotistical desire for visibility. I encountered [Theresa's] work through her poems and writings first, and then after I moved to New York in 2015, I learned that she had a piece, *White Dust*

From Mongolia, that was never finished. I started to look at [Theresa's] work through *White Dust From Mongolia* and then went back to her earlier video works and also her sketches. She always had this planning sketch of how the camera movement would work. She had this idea of in-camera editing, so it is always about setting up the camera position and making the work without post-production editing. I was also interested in this technique. There were a lot of other overlapping interests in terms of the visual language that she used—the atmosphere and the feeling that her work naturally has, that has always been intriguing to me. I had access to this piece, *White Dust From Mongolia*, because I contacted Berkeley Film Archive as an archivist, so I actually had the chance to see the piece for the first time in my office with my colleague. I think I started thinking about her piece through two lenses, as both an archivist and an artist.

When I was working on *Upon Leaving the White Dust*, my colleague and I were discussing mostly how reconstruction, as a particular kind of art practice, challenges the nature of authorship and copyright. More importantly, it constructs a subtle relationship between two realities, against the uniqueness of a work of art. I am interested in inserting myself into the past because I'm fascinated with the myth of time and built-in memory in one's body. Working with archives as an artist provides me the path to intervene in history, as much as inviting the past—human or non-human—to have a voice in the present.

YSM I just wanted to add here that when I first became aware of [*White Dust From Mongolia*] in the 1980s, it didn't register as anything particular to me. But when I went to Gwangju, South Korea, in 2002—to prepare for the biennial exhibition, *THERE: Sites of Korean Diaspora* that I curated—on one specific day, I couldn't see the sun at all as dust was everywhere. It had fallen on everything and you could scrape a bit of the dust from any surface outside. And I thought,

wow, this is real. I learned a bit later that this dust migrated all the way from the Gobi Desert in Mongolia to reach Korea. This migration happens regularly, and the wind can carry it all the way to California.

CW I was also fascinated by her statement about the piece, about how she perceived Asia as whole cultures. She has this really soft-hearted kind of perspective, of how she perceives cultural differences, where the end result of it is not to separate them, but to bridge them. From there, I think I understood that sometimes there might be no equivalents between cultures, and instead of trying to find equivalents, we may go to the bottom level of values, and seek what has been important to a culture; the way of life and its enjoyment. When cultures find there are no equivalents, they can start learning from each other.

YSM In a way, the dust can be a bridge that travels very freely...

CW ...through these internal histories between Asian countries, of course, affected by the Cold War. Yeah, I think she had a very unique view of approaching not only South Korea and North Korea, but also extending this view to the whole of Asia. I was very touched by her view. At the time, I was also longing for a view like that to support me in terms of being a person or an artist, an individual, in New York, because in a way, I did (and do) feel culturally very distant from my own homeland because of the Cultural Revolution.

C Can we ask one last question: you mentioned earlier the strong reception of Theresa's work by other Koreans. Do you remember anything else about that? Perhaps how you felt that people related to that work? Because, you said that initially when *Dictée* was released it was kind of seen as avant-garde and people couldn't really get it until *Writing Self, Writing Nation* came out.

Dictée, like the other published book of hers, was later recognized by her Korean community. I want to recall one performance that Theresa did in Steve Laub's grad class. The audience consisted of her fellow students in that class and me. I wasn't in that class. Her props were spare. She sat down and she had a plate and an apple and a knife. She proceeded to peel the apple. I was the only fellow Korean there, and I could relate to it on several different levels. It's a custom in traditional Korean culture that, after a family dinner, it's usually the woman's role to get the family together and she'd peel an apple a certain way before serving it. It was also a custom that the woman peels it all at once which means that you go around, in a continuous circle, and you try not to break that continuity. It was said that a woman who can peel it perfectly in that manner would marry well. It reminds me of a segment from an Ozu film, *Late Spring*, (which I appropriated for one of my videos, *Overseas / at sea*). The film tells a story about a father and daughter relationship, where the daughter has finally found someone and she's going to get married and the father is peeling the apple in a circular manner when the peeling breaks. It's at this point where he but also we, the viewers realize deep within that his daughter's going to be leaving him. That's all intimated by the peeling of the apple. Switching gears back to her performance, Theresa peeled the apple in a competent and controlled manner. Then she proceeded to cut it into all these quarters and then pass the plate around. Her pacing, calmness, and everything about it was so compelling, it had her audience in her thrall. Her silent performance brought out a certain kind of awareness of the extra meanings for me as a Korean. The effect was not necessarily about a nationalism where you're so glad to be a Korean above all, but a certain kind of sensitivity and an understanding. I think that's the impact that she had on other Koreans who experienced her other performances. The formal qualities, including her manner and the cadences integrated within the content of her work, resonated her

subtle references and struck a chord with them. I've seen her after some performances at Berkeley or in San Francisco where a cluster of Koreans approached her to let her know that they were with her and got it.

Yong Soon Min (b. 1953, Seoul) engages interdisciplinary sources to examine issues of representation and cultural identities and the intersection of history and memory. She is Professor Emerita at UC Irvine and has served on the Board of Directors of Asian American Arts Alliance, national Board of Directors of CAA, and Korean American Museum. Min is a recipient of the Fulbright Senior Research Grant, Anonymous Was a Woman Award, Guggenheim Foundation grant and National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) Visual Artist Award in New Genre. Significant exhibitions include *The Decade Show, New Museum; decolonization, Bronx Museum; the 10th Havana Biennial; and the 7th Gwangju Biennale*, curated by Okwui Enwezor. Min participated in the Whitney Independent Study Program in 1981.

Cici Wu's biography can be found in the first booklet of this catalog.