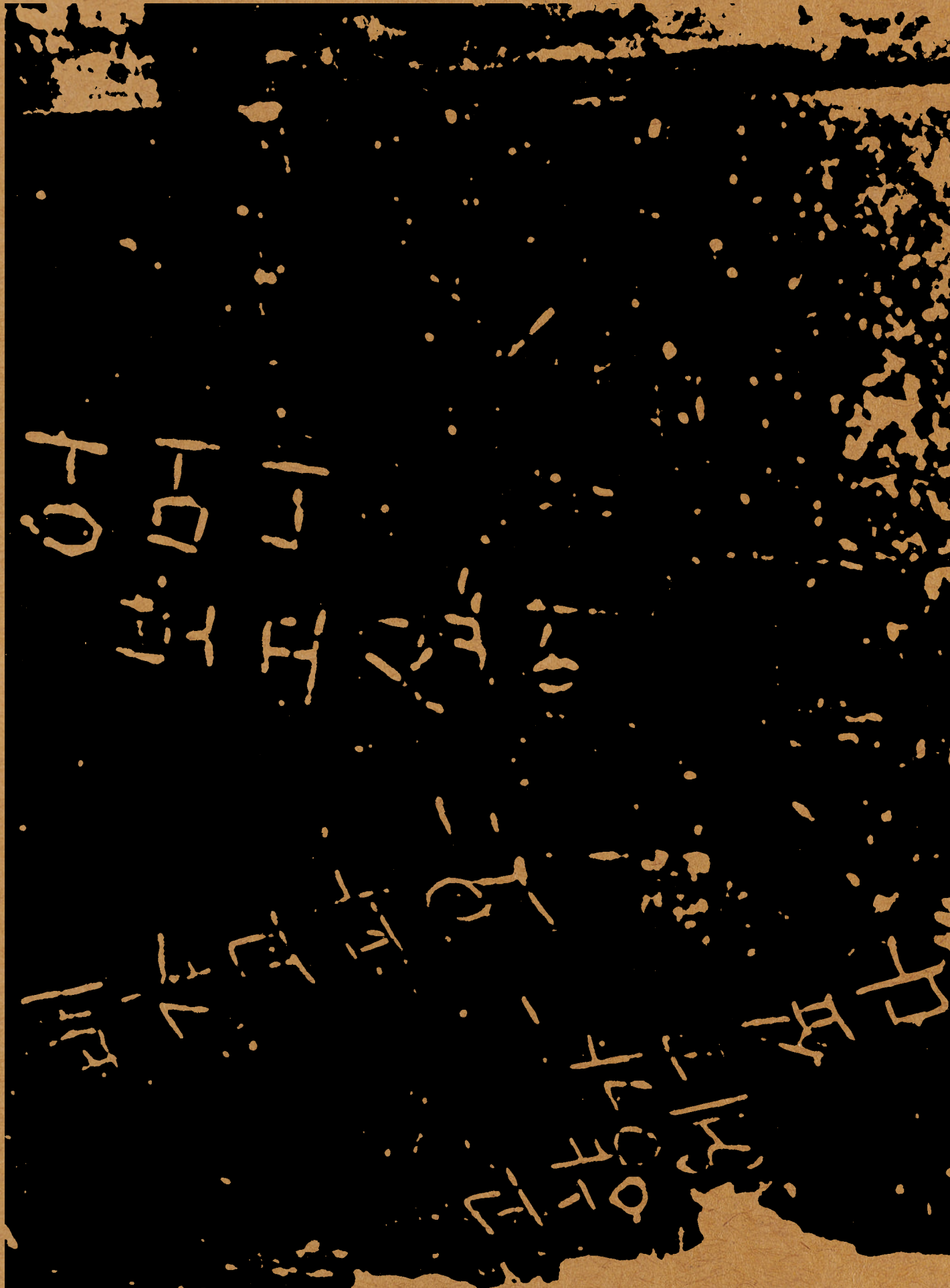




Theresa Hak Kyung Cha:
Multiple Offerings

Artists Space
Sept. 11– Nov. 21, 2026



“The landscape exists inside the screen.”

Imagine for just a moment that your home country has been invaded and bombed apart, that you are taken, at age 13, far away into a strange, huge country; that you land in a Catholic school where your prescribed activity is to study the Catholic religion, to learn the English language, to learn the French language and to study the Greek classics, as well as the usual math, science, US history etc. And, outside the school building, it's the 1960s in America.¹

In 2018, Reese Williams, founder of Tanam Press and close friend, classmate, and collaborator of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, published a reflection in which he discussed his experience of rereading Cha's celebrated, genre-breaking novel-poem Dictée (1982). He describes incalculable loss: exile, dislocation, and a forceful repositioning of one's sense of place. He also ruminates on the resonance of the book's dark maroon color, which emerged from Cha's keen attention to the visual markers of her surroundings. Williams recalled having seen an "undulating wave" of this color moving through the streets of Lower Manhattan—Tibetan monks in robes. The image is a potent symbol of migration, one that Cha would have noticed and understood deeply as she walked toward the loft where she and Williams were working on page layouts for Dictée.² Cha had been an editor at Tanam Press for nearly two years when she died on November 5, 1982, just weeks after the book's release.

The word "imagine" here prompts such visceral, palpable imagery. Born in Busan during the Korean War, Cha migrated to Hawaii and then, in 1964 at the age of 13, to San Francisco. That was the year the Civil Rights Act was signed into law. It was also the Freedom Summer, the dangerous voter-registration campaign organized by activists to register as many African Americans as possible in Mississippi. Two years later, the Black Panther Party made national headlines during the Hunter's Point social uprising, a 128-hour civil disturbance in San Francisco that resulted in the deployment of approximately two thousand National Guard troops. Cha came of age in a city and country marked by political organizing, racial unrest, and demands for social change.

From 1969 to 1978 she studied at the University of California, Berkeley, where student protests periodically resulted in campus closures and police tear gassing. Artistic interventions were also taking place across campus. Terry Fox's Defoliation Piece (1970) involved using a flamethrower to scorch a plot of Chinese jasmine outside the University Art Museum; the work was a response to the US military's scorched-earth tactics in Vietnam.³ Efforts by the Third World Liberation Front—a multiracial student coalition, grounded in global solidarity—demanded the university recognize the histories of communities of color, which led to the establishment of the first ethnic studies department in the United States.

For the 1976 academic year, Cha went abroad to the Centre d'Études Américaines du Cinéma in Paris, where she took classes in film theory and studied closely with

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Thierry Kuntzel and Christian Metz. This ongoing interest in the viewer's relation to the cinematic apparatus would lead her to edit Apparatus, Cinematographic Apparatus: Selected Writings (1981), another forward-thinking Tanam Press project. In its preface, she describes its aim as identifying the individual components and interdependent operations comprising "the film, the author of the film, the spectator."

Cha also traveled across Europe, connecting with avant-garde artists and writers. Among them were the Mexican artist and publisher Ulises Carrión, who ran the Amsterdam bookshop Other Books and So, an early space for international mail art and conceptual ephemera, and the Icelandic artist Hreinn Friðfinnsson, who ran Galerie Lóa in Haarlem, Netherlands. For her presentation of Audience, Distance, Relative (1978) at Galerie Lóa, Cha mailed six envelopes to the gallery, each containing a folded sheet of poetic text. Audience members were instructed to read them while a recording of Cha reciting the texts played overhead. Bridging the conceptual, the poetic, and the participatory, the work also absorbed within itself the postal system's inherent delay, evoking the distance between sender, receiver, time, and space.

By 1980, Cha had moved to New York, where while pursuing her artistic career she worked several jobs, including as an administrative assistant at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and an instructor of video art at Elizabeth Seton College. She exhibited across the city. At the Queens Museum in 1981, she exhibited her video and film installation Exilée (1980). The work explores exile through the distance between Cha and her lost homeland, describing a flight from San Francisco to Seoul in terms of sixteen time zones. A 1979 trip to South Korea with her brother James—her first visit since she'd left seventeen years earlier—and the resulting (unfinished) film White Dust from Mongolia established a conceptual and thematic framework for Exilée (and other works, like Dictée). The siblings returned in May 1980 to continue production but were forced to abandon their efforts, as protests had erupted against the country's military dictatorship. The demonstrations were violently suppressed by state forces in what became known as the May 18 Gwangju Uprising.⁴

At the time of her death, Cha was producing an installation of images and text for a group exhibition at Artists Space curated by Valerie Smith. The images were photographs of details from paintings from across global art history, each one showing human hands. In lieu of the unfinished piece, Artists Space exhibited Dictée as well as a wall-based installation of images and text drawn from it. Reese Williams, together with Cha's husband, Richard Barnes, helped realize the work.

Cha once said: "The content of my work has been the realization of the imprint, the inscription etched from the experience of leaving, the experience of America."⁵ It is a powerful acknowledgment of marks exerted on flesh and soul by international movement, whether voluntary or forced. The poet Ken Chen, in his text "The Stakes of Dictée" (2022), suggests that the best way to approach Dictée is through ritual, noting that it is a kind of exorcism, "a very literal attempt to reverse the flow of time, to go back before the coming of war and exile."⁶ It is also, he notes,

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about love: love as longing, as memory, as an attempt to reach across the distances that external forces have imposed.

Across text, performance, film, video, and visual media, Cha returned again and again to the unstable territories of memory, language, translation, history, and displacement. The work thus feels more urgent than ever today. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha: Multiple Offerings is the first retrospective devoted to Cha in twenty-five years. This New York presentation, a collaboration between Artists Space and the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, brings together nearly one hundred works and archival materials, allowing Dictée to be encountered not as an isolated literary achievement but as one constellation within a much larger interdisciplinary practice.

The title, Multiple Offerings, echoes Cha’s own formulation of “multiple telling with multiple offering”—a practice grounded in the belief that meaning does not belong to a single voice, medium, or fixed chronology.⁷ Her work instead asks us to move between fragments: between languages, between countries, between the remembered and the lived. In this sense, the retrospective does more than gather the remnants of a tragically brief career. It reopens the spaces Cha inhabited and transformed, inviting us to imagine what it means to carry a place with you after you have gone—the imprint left behind, the traces of departure, and the markings permanently etched by new terrains.

1. See <https://www.detroitresearch.org/reading-dictee-in-2018-reese-williams/>.

2. China’s occupation of Tibet began in 1950, followed by the 1959 Tibetan uprising and the flight of the Dalai Lama and tens of thousands of Tibetans into exile.

3. The Bay Area art scene was vibrant in the late 1960s and 1970s. Omnipresent were gestures and scenarios that found their place out in the world, on the street. See Danielle A. Jackson, “A Witnessing,” in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha: Multiple Offerings (Berkeley: Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, 2026), 131–132.

4. Exhibition signage at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive further explains: “Set against Japan’s occupation of Korea (1910–45), White Dust from Mongolia brings the intertwined histories of Japan and Korea together with Cha’s family history through a fictional narrative. Her parents, both schoolteachers, grew up in Japanese-controlled Manchuria (present-day north-eastern China), where they were prohibited from speaking Korean.”

5. From an artist’s statement by Cha for a National Endowment for the Arts application.

6. Ken Chen, “The Stakes of Dictée,” The Yale Review, September 1, 2022, <https://yalereview.org/article/chen-dictee-introduction-cha/>.

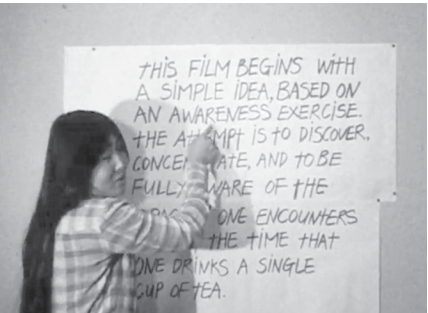
7. From an artist’s statement by Cha, reprinted on pg. 26.



The following texts were originally written for Theresa Hak Kyung Cha: Multiple Offerings, presented at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive January 24 through April 19, 2026. It has been slightly modified to reflect the presentation at Artists Space.

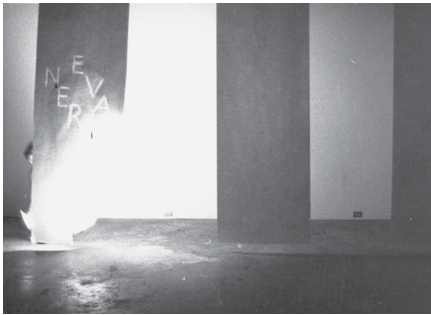


At UC Berkeley, Cha studied with the prominent Bay Area ceramicists Peter Voulkos and Jim Melchert, who helped establish the school’s ceramics program in the late 1950s and opened a studio on Shattuck Avenue, known colloquially as the pot shop. Voulkos and Melchert—alongside fellow ceramics faculty members Don Haskin, Matt Glavin, and Joseph Pugliese—instituted an open-door policy, allowing students to drop into the studio and work at nearly all hours. Cha was among these students, and her ceramic vessels from the early 1970s exemplify the multidisciplinary approach to materials and craft techniques she undertook as a student. The impressionistic glazes of the jars and vases are representative of the broader Bay Area experimental ceramics scene, but their heavy clay bodies and rounded forms suggest that Cha drew equal inspiration from Korean earthenware traditions such as onggi pots and dal hangari, or moon jars. Forty-seven color slides of these pots are projected onto the gallery wall—a “material” that became prominent in many of Cha’s future performances.

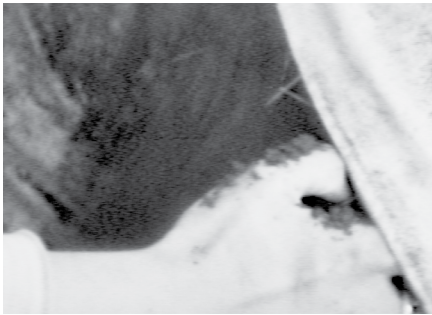


As Cha developed her artistic sensibility in the early 1970s, she experimented with film and filmed performance. Recent innovations, including the commercial availability of the handheld Super 8 film camera, made film more accessible for home movies and independent artistic productions. In Untitled (Trip/Theresa), Cha and her friend Trip Callaghan are in an empty classroom carrying out a simple conceptual proposition. Addressing the camera, Cha points to each word of a handwritten prompt pinned to the wall: “This film begins with a simple idea, based on an awareness exercise. The attempt is to discover, concentrate, and to be fully aware of the ‘spaces’ one encounters during the time that one takes to drink a single cup of tea.” In works such as Moon Sun and Untitled (Umbrella), the artist used readily available objects and materials to explore techniques particular to film, such as zooming and panning. These Super 8 fragments encapsulate the playful nature of Cha’s early artistic experimentation, which would inform her later full-scale productions.

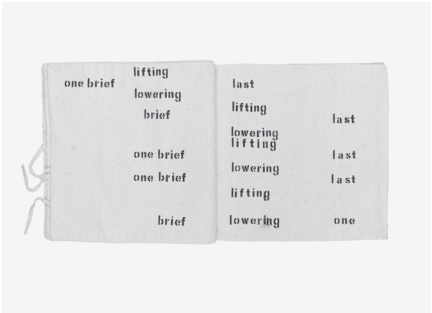
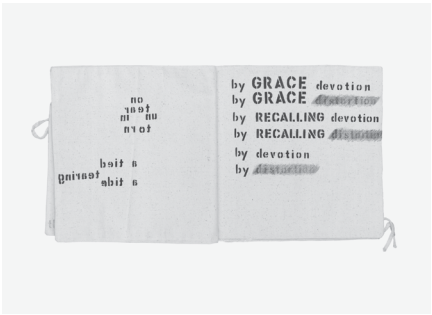
Pictured above:
Untitled (Trip/Theresa), 1970



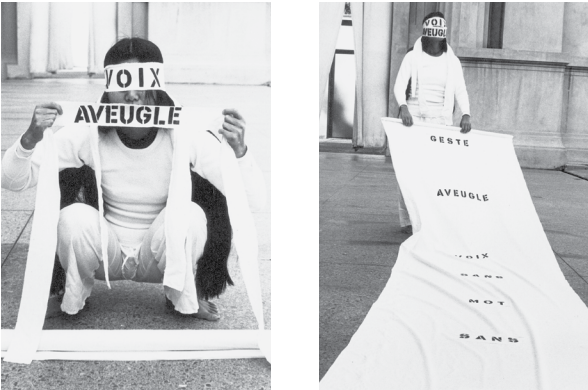
For this work, first performed at Worth Ryder Art Gallery on the UC Berkeley campus, Cha suspended three long sheets of white paper, onto which she inscribed the words “BARREN,” “CAVE,” and “MUTE” in wax. With controlled movements, she lit a candle and drew it close to the paper’s surface, slowly revealing the obscured words to the audience before burning each sheet to the ground. The performance enacts theories of semiotics—which circulated widely in 1970s art, film, and academic circles—by foregrounding the contingent and unstable relationship between words and their meanings. The words themselves evoke ideas of enforced absence, enclosure, and silence, reflecting Cha’s interest in interrogating the historical ruptures caused by colonialism, war, and exile, as well as the resulting conditions of cultural and linguistic loss.



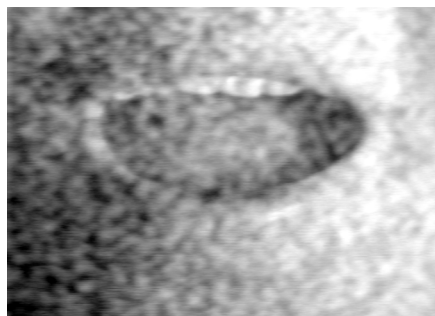
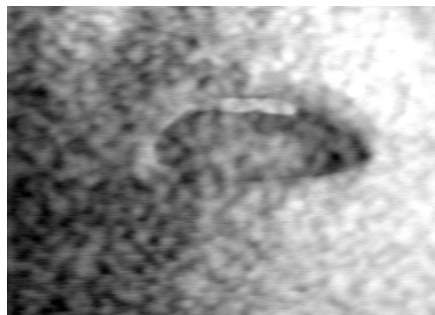
Secret Spill follows Cha’s physical movements as she stages a performance outdoors at the edges of the UC Berkeley campus. Through long, slow takes and extreme close-ups of grass, trees, a taut rope, and two bulging sacks filled with soil, the camera probes the scene, reducing the viewer’s comprehension of the environment to fragments. The artist’s deliberate gestures—stroking the surfaces of the white bags, unzipping them, and running her fingers through the spilled earth—heighten the tension and suspense palpable throughout the work. Returning the soil to the ground in a private ritual, Secret Spill connects the personal with the ecological, prefiguring the emergence of ecofeminism in the 1970s and 1980s.



In Pomegranate Offering, Cha adapted the Greek myth of Persephone, whose abduction and descent into the underworld were prompted by her consumption of pomegranate seeds. Using charcoal, ink, and red pigment, Pomegranate Offering evokes both pomegranate juice and blood, foregrounding the embodied experience of displacement and the desire for return that shape diasporic subjectivity. This work is an important precursor to Cha’s Dictée (1982), which similarly draws on mythology to recover female voices that have been suppressed or erased.



Aveugle Voix translates literally from French as “blind voice,” but the title can phonetically be interpreted as “the blind see.” For this performance, documented during a rehearsal at UC Berkeley’s Greek Theatre, Cha drew on her studies of French and her familiarity with Korean cultural traditions. White garments have long held significance in Korean history, suggesting grief or mourning, but in the twentieth century, wearing white signified political resistance to the Japanese occupation of the Korean peninsula (1910–45). Dressed all in white, Cha tied fabric strips stenciled with the titular words over her mouth and eyes, rendering herself mute and blind. She then unfurled a fabric banner, revealing a set of phrases in both English and French—for example “words fail me” and “sans mot”—that expose the limits of speech and the politics of who is allowed to speak. In the wake of the Free Speech Movement, strikes led by the Third World Liberation Front, and the antiwar protests that mobilized the UC Berkeley campus in the late 1960s and 1970s, Cha’s silent performance reads as an encoded gesture of resistance.



Cha wrote in an artist statement, “The main body of my work is with language, looking for the roots of the language before it is born on the tip of the tongue. Since having been forced to learn foreign languages more consciously at a later age, there has existed a different perception and orientation toward language.” Cha learned English after emigrating from South Korea to the United States with her family in 1962, when she was eleven years old. Mouth to Mouth isolates her mouth silently sounding out the eight Korean vowels depicted in the opening shots, the slow and labored articulation of each unit evoking the embodied search for one’s mother tongue. Sounds of running water and visual static create dissonance between what we see and what we expect to hear, highlighting the fragility of communication in the context of migration and exile.



Cha performed A Ble Wail (read phonetically as “a blue whale”) at Worth Ryder Art Gallery on the UC Berkeley campus. She partitioned the back half of the room with large bolts of semi-transparent cheesecloth—a nod to radical performances she had witnessed at Berkeley’s University Art Museum by Terry Fox and Linda Montano—and placed lit candles in front of small mirrors to form an oval stage. A Ble Wail draws heavily on Korean shamanistic rituals, or musok, traditionally presided over by female practitioners known as mudang. Cha evoked this comparison by covering her eyes with a white headband and dressing in a long white robe that revealed strips of red and black fabric underneath as she moved. During the performance, she alternated between stillness and ritualistic motions: With wet fingers she circled the rims of glasses filled with varying levels of water; she beat a drum; and she ripped fabric to punctuate the otherwise silent space with sound. Through this performance’s combination of trancelike movement and affective atmosphere, Cha sought to be “the dream of the audience.”





Works in the Exhibition



“The content of my work has been the realization of the imprint, the inscription etched from the experience of leaving, the experience of America,” Cha wrote, reflecting on her diasporic existence as a Korean immigrant to the United States. In this series of photographs, each T-shirt is stamped with a play on the term “Americanism.” The various phrases range from spirited individualism (“A / merry / can / ism”) to disfiguration (“A / marr / can / ism”), evoking a fractured and multivalent experience of America.

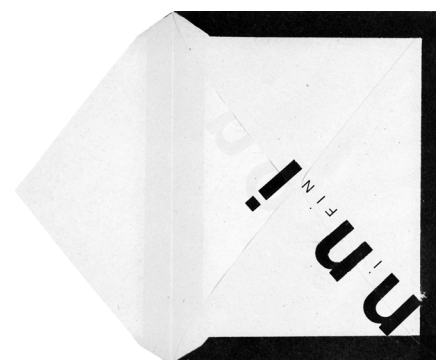
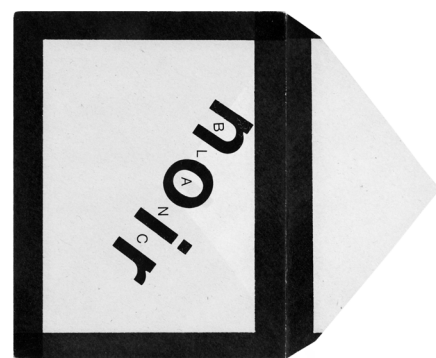
Works in the Exhibition



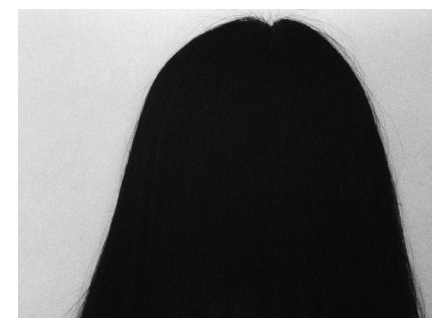
Reese Williams is an artist, performer, and publisher who was one of Cha’s friends and frequent collaborators. In 1973, Williams entered the MFA program at UC Berkeley, where he met Cha in a class taught by Jim Melchert. In 1975, at the University Art Museum (now the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive), Williams staged Life Mixing—an experimental sound work in which performers, including Cha, lay scattered across the museum’s atrium, each reciting a text into a microphone while Williams mixed their voices through a synthesizer. For Music in Loop Patterns, Williams fed Cha’s voice through a synthesizer in repetitive loops during one of the many jam sessions the two held at his apartment. Together, these works exemplify the spirit of collaboration and the many experiments with new media technologies that marked the Bay Area art scene at the time.



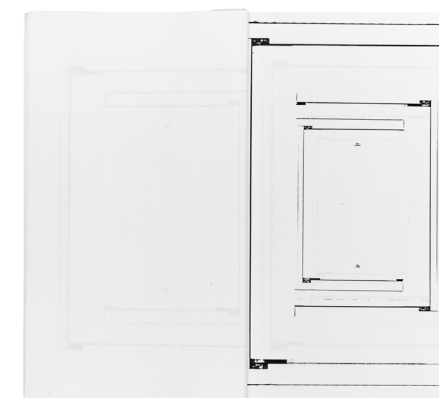
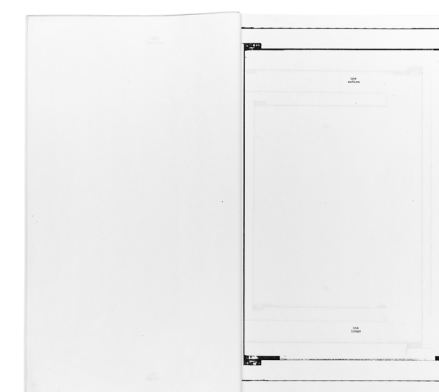
Throughout Cha's practice, language is treated as a mutable and malleable material. Moving between multiple languages, including English, French, and Korean, Cha revealed how meaning can be constructed by piecing together individual units of language like letters, words, or phrases, semantic units that can be easily deconstructed to reveal new meanings. This video work opens with the text fragments "VIDÉ," "VIDÉ O," and "O ÈME" appearing sequentially on the screen. In French, vidé means "emptied." With the addition of o (eau, the French word for water), vidé o suggests the phrase "emptied water." Lastly, the neologism vidéoème merges vidéo with poème, referring to the form of the work itself—a video poem. These distinct and unrelated phrases are exemplary of Cha's frequent use of puns and double meanings across languages.



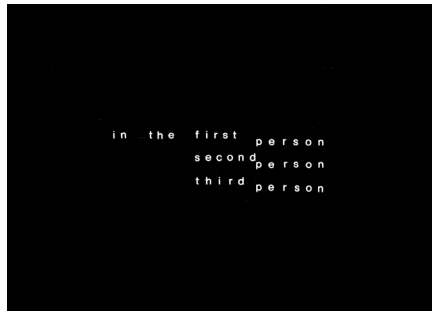
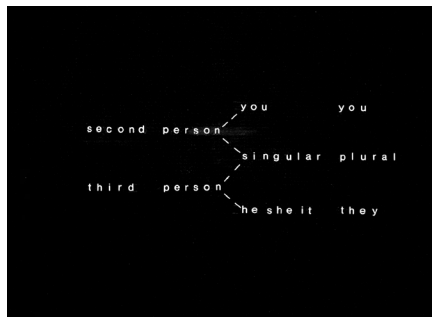
Faire-Part is a suite of fifteen envelopes—the quintessential container of mailed correspondence—that function as both form and content. In French, a faire-part is a printed announcement, usually relating to a life event such as a birth, marriage, or death. The thick black borders of Cha's envelopes frame the works' empty space, with isolated text units that draw further attention to the void; for instance, the word vide (French for "empty") floats at the center of one of the envelopes. In Cha's hands, the announcement is as much a declaration of nothing as it is an invitation to populate the space with the recipients' own poetic imaginings.



Permutations is composed of six one-second shots of Cha's younger sister Bernadette. It alternates between shots of her face with her eyes open and closed, as well as views of the back of her head. Cha organized the shot sequence using chance operations—a method embracing randomness and indeterminacy popularized in the 1960s and 1970s by the avant-garde composer John Cage. Despite the precision of Bernadette's on-screen performance, her liveness emerges through tiny variations: an exposed ear, a stray hair, an upturned corner of her lip. Near the end of the film, Cha appears for a split second, spliced in between two shots of Bernadette. Layering multiple identities and temporalities in a single frame, Cha evoked the siblings' familial bonds while also drawing the viewer into a subtle interplay of recognition and misrecognition.



Each photocopied page of une action/une image shows a sequentially smaller image of the preceding page. Drawing on the cinematic principle known as persistence of vision, the work translates the experience of film into a tactile, handheld form. Ernie Gehr's Serene Velocity (1970), for example, can be read alongside une action/une image as a related exploration of repetition, incremental change, and the viewer's perception of time. Gehr, who taught at the San Francisco Art Institute, captured a stationary view down the length of an institutional corridor using incremental shifts in the camera's zoom. Reading une action/une image is analogous to the experience of viewing film: The act of flipping through its pages draws attention to the time-based experience of reading itself.



Cha made this work as a maquette for a slide projection first shown in 1977 at Worth Ryder Art Gallery on the UC Berkeley campus. Its pared-down visual language—white text and geometric forms set against a stark black background—recalls the informational aesthetics of Conceptualism and early computer-generated experiments from the 1960s and 1970s. Using simple graphics like circles and lines, alongside pronouns like “you” and “me” in both English and Korean (neh and nah in the latter), Cha diagrammatically explored how linguistic structures shape perception, identity, and spatial relations between self and other.



Cha performed Réveillé dans la Brume (Awakened in the Mist) at Fort Mason Center in San Francisco. With the audience seated in complete darkness, she lit a single match and encircled her body with her arm—the minor drama of the extinguished flame setting off a complex interplay of voice and gesture, light and sound, motion and stasis. “As an integral part of the performance,” Cha explained, “there would be operative, a chain of interruptions, averting the narrative process . . . pursuing that which is stated by Roland Barthes as ‘plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages.’” The immersive environment left the audience in a trance-like state: “We were floating, coming close to something, suspended, yet in a vortex of ineffable thoughts and sensations,” the artist Judith Barry recalled.



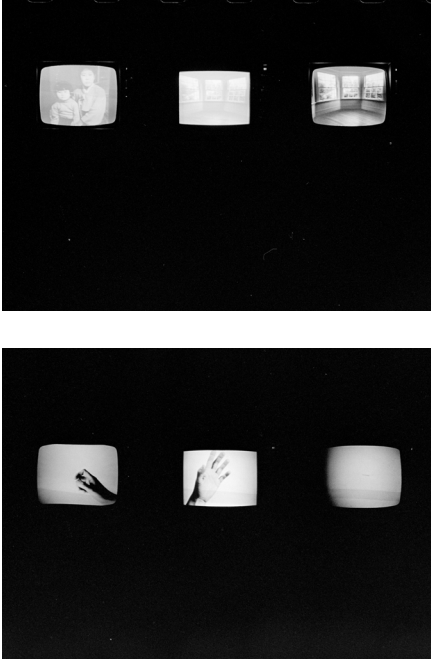


Cha frequently used personal keepsakes and public archives as source material. For Chronology, she manipulated photocopies of family photographs by rendering them in different colors. Portraits of her parents, an image from their wedding day, and a photograph of Cha with her siblings—John, Elizabeth, James, and Bernadette—are layered and repeated, evoking a nonlinear sense of time in which past, present, and future coexist. The accompanying text uses capitalization and homonyms to suggest multiple meanings. For instance, in the phrase “could HAVE been kNot one,” the word “knot” evokes familial bonds, while its homonym “not” suggests undoing. The capitalized letters spell HAN, both the name of the major river that flows through Seoul and a Korean cultural concept often described as an accumulation of grief and longing shaped by histories of injustice and loss. Through this work, Cha revealed how inheritance—familial, linguistic, or historical—is not simply passed down through generations, but continually reassembled.

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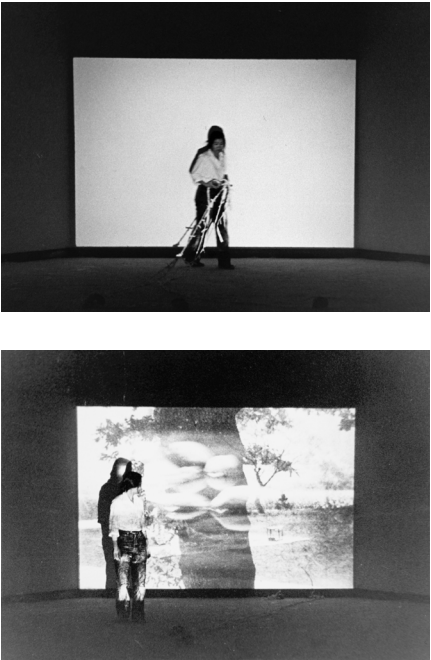


Audience Distant Relative builds on the legacy of Conceptual art forms from the 1960s on—such as the international Fluxus movement, Nouveau Réalisme, and the New York Correspondence School—that used printed matter and administrative systems like the postal mail and telegraphs to communicate information across a broad artistic network. Cha first exhibited this work as a multimedia installation at Galerie Lóá in Haarlem, the Netherlands, in 1978. Over the course of seven days, she mailed the gallery six envelopes, each containing a folded sheet of poetic text. As her instructions indicate, she intended for audience members to open the envelopes and read the material contained within, while a recorded audiotape of her reciting the texts played simultaneously overhead. Bridging the conceptual, the poetic, and the participatory, Audience Distant Relative embraces the inherent delay of the postal system as integral to the work itself, evoking time and space as collaborators in Cha’s missives.



Cha developed the three-channel video installation Passages Paysages for her MFA thesis exhibition at the University Art Museum (now the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive) in 1978. To create the work, the title of which riffs on the French word for “landscapes,” Cha filmed a series of still photographs taken by her partner, Richard Barnes, of his Berkeley bedroom. The video proceeds as a series of dissolves and fades of these photographs, propelled forward by the lilting cadence of Cha’s voice narrating a text on memory, ancestry, and homeland. The images and sounds in Passages Paysages do not directly relate to one another. As Cha wrote in a description of the work, it “experiments with three languages in their written form and spoken form,” using images as “sequences of implied events, for what is present to the viewer is only the remnant, the memory.”

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First performed at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Other Things Seen, Other Things Heard (Ailleurs) exemplifies the capaciousness of Cha’s interdisciplinary practice. In a small, darkened gallery, Cha used a slide projector to display images drawn from various sources, including a still of the stage actress Renée Falconetti from Carl Theodor Dreyer’s 1928 film The Passion of Joan of Arc. As recorded and live voices echoed throughout the space, Cha placed herself in front of the projection in a process she referred to as “a possible alternative to the . . . flat and two-dimensional image.” Raising her arms above her head, she slowly and rhythmically dragged fabric ropes tied to rocks across the floor strewn with plaster dust. After seeing the performance, one art critic wrote that he “left feeling suspended between consciousness and unconsciousness, as if I had been dreaming someone else’s dreams.”

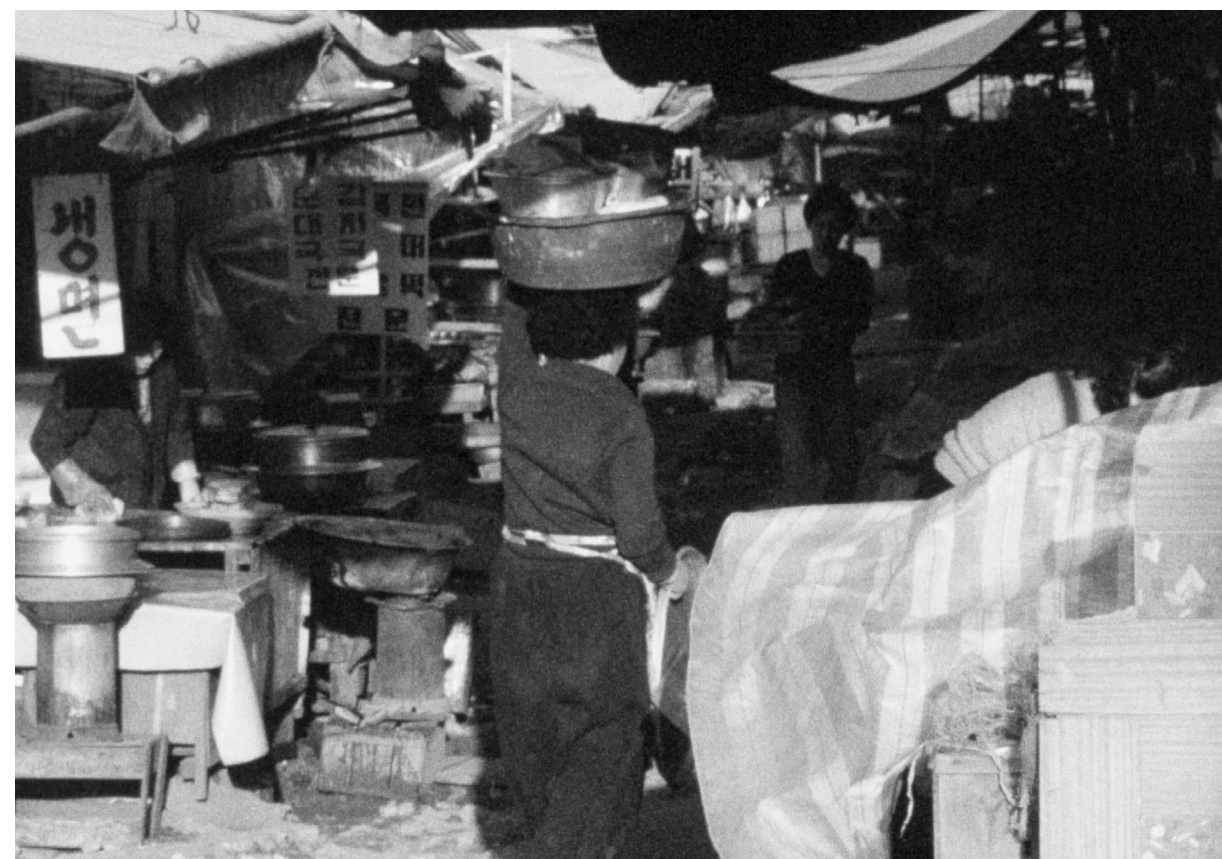


In 1977 Cha took a photography course at Laney College in Oakland, later gathering the images alongside fragments of texts she had written. The photographs depict locations across the Bay Area that were familiar to her, including the Berkeley restaurant Le Bateau Ivre (The Drunken Boat), named after a poem by Arthur Rimbaud. Several of the images were taken inside the Convent of the Sacred Heart, the San Francisco high school that Cha attended between 1964 and 1968. It was there that she first studied the French language and read Greek and Roman classics, where discipline (“the rigid obsessive order”) was meted out and instilled in the mind, and where it was met with defiance by reading the forbidden books of “D. H. Lawrence, Mary McCarthy, Henry Miller, in spite of, anyway.” The texts accompanying the photographs do not describe the images at hand. Instead, they offer impressionistic memories, subverting the viewer’s expectations and allowing for open and fluid interpretations of both image and text.

Works in the Exhibition



An unfinished film project and book exploring themes of diaspora and exile, White Dust from Mongolia draws upon footage that Cha shot on location in South Korea in 1980, with her brother James. The two first traveled to Korea in 1979, seventeen years after leaving the country. When they returned a year later, Korea was in the midst of a political crisis, as student-led protestors filled the streets to march against the military coup of Chun Doo-hwan. After being harassed by state police, who were suspicious of their cameras, the siblings left Korea and spent the remainder of their travels in Japan. White Dust from Mongolia follows the fictional story of a young Korean woman residing in Manchuria (present-day China) during Japan’s imperial occupation of Korea (1910–45). The film sought to weave fragmented narratives of Korean history and personal identity against the backdrop of northeast China’s vast, desolate landscapes. The footage, storyboards, and shot list of this work in progress stand as a testament to the complex political and emotional dimensions of Cha’s artistic approach.



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Cha made Exilée (“exiled” in French) following her first return trip to Korea in 1979. For this film and video installation, she embedded a television monitor into a freestanding wall and projected a Super 8 film onto its surface, superimposing the two forms of moving image. In the accompanying soundtrack, Cha reflected on the distance traveled from San Francisco to Korea as measured in passing minutes and in terms of the sixteen time-zone hours that separate California from the country of her birth. Cha understood such distances—physical, temporal, emotional—as a condition of diaspora, and she materialized these displacements through separate and overlapping forms of media, including film, video, and audio. The text work Exilée/ Temps Morts (published in Hotel [Tanam Press, 1980], also in this exhibition) captures this reflection in text, conveying the experience of exile as multilayered and constantly shifting.

Works in the Exhibition



At the time of her death in November 1982, Cha was making new work for a group exhibition at Artists Space. While working as an administrative assistant at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, she began a study of depictions of hands in European portraiture. In the press release for Group Exhibition: Victor Alzamora, Jennifer Bolande, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and Steve Pollack, organized by former Artists Space curator Valerie Smith, Cha’s unfinished work is described thusly: “Theresa Hak Kyung Cha had been working on a specific installation of images and text. . . . The images were details from paintings which she photographed from various books and reproductions. Each photograph represented a different depiction of hands, for example the hands in a French painting of a certain century, the hands in Dutch painting or Chinese painting etc. . . . She was writing a text to accompany each image which was to be in the language of the country of the painting’s origin. The piece was intended to be an aesthetic and anthropological study of cultural differences using hands as a metaphor.” Cha’s selection of details emphasizes her interest in unsettling the canon of Western art history using lo-fi techniques of reproduction, fragmentation, and repetition.



Artist's Writings

Hak Kyung Theresa Cha
Born in Pusan, Korea 1951
Immigrated to the United States 1962
Education: University of California at Berkeley
Comparative Literature, Art Practice, Film theory-practice,
and Video.

The main body of my work is with Language, "looking for the roots of the language before it is born on the tip of the tongue."

Since having been forced to learn foreign languages more "consciously" at a later age, there has existed a different perception and orientation toward language. Certain areas that continue to hold interest for me are: grammatical structures of a language, syntax. How words and meaning are constructed in the language system itself, by function or usage, and how transformation is brought about through manipulation, processes as changing the syntax, isolation, removing from context, repetition, and reduction to minimal units.

These concerns are experimented with in book-making, with written texts and images, incorporated still within another structure, questioning qualities inherent in the material, that of the book. (page sequence, silences pauses, time, space)

Similar intention and processes follow in working with other media and material; video, film, slides, projection, and performance, but with references to their particular structures.

The audience-spectator is a major consideration, from conception to realization of the piece. She/He holds a privileged place in that She/He is the receptor and or activator central to an exchange or dialogue.

The importance of audience becomes especially clear when the nature of these works deal with narratives. The audience is the subject to whom the narrative is being transmitted to.

The narrative structure attempts to be free from the more traditional linear progression. The focus is in producing

Multiple Telling with Multiple Offering. The "narrating" is carried by a written text and or images that one sees on a screen, ~~in a~~ environment, with a text that one hears synchronously or non-synchronous-ly. The content varies from sources that are highly personal, drawn from heritage, memory, et cetera, to that are more didactic.

Introducing the performance aspect to projection is to present a possible alternative to the projected image that continues to remain flat and two-dimensional. It is also to explore criteria as time, movement, (real, illusionist), the basic unit of time, movement in a gesture as simple as turning of a person's head for example. A direct interaction with the audience in same space and time is achieved as well as uniting the spectator with the "Absent" where and the "Absent" when the images and words were ^{FIRST} made.

P A T H S

M F A THESIS
THERESA HAK KYUNG CHA
MAY, 1978

Alchemical elements used by Alchemists could be most commonplace; water, air, fire, earth, etc. They simply exist, as space, as time exists, almost unnoticeably. The Alchemist takes these few elements, even though most ordinary, obtains them with the utmost care and precision. (water collected from dew settled on leaves...)

He enters a covenant with these elements, with the intention not of imposition upon these materials, not so much to transform and shape them according to his will, but during the unfolding of this pact, these elements will be the ones to transform his soul. He will work on them, with them, without any distinction, as he works on his soul. From lead into gold, from one state to another, energy source transferred to another, undergoing a magical process.

"When the artist reveals the reality concealed in things, he sets it free, and in turn, he liberates and purifies himself."

Creativity and Taoism
A Study of Chinese Philosophy,
Art, and Poetry
Chang Chung-yuan

The artist's path is close to that of an alchemist in that his/her path is that of a medium. His/Her vision belongs to an altering, of material, and of perception. Through this attempt, the perception of an audience has the possibility of being altered, of being presented a constant change, Revolution.

The artist, like the alchemist, establishes a "covenant" with his elements, as well as with each member of the viewer. The artist becoming object for the viewer, the viewer as subject, the artist as subject, and viewer as object. The necessary covenant, "interfusion of subject and object" is then, finalized.

"Once I dreamt that I was a butterfly, fluttering here and there; in all ways a butterfly. I enjoyed my freedom as a butterfly, not knowing that I was Chou. Suddenly I awoke and was surprised to be myself again. Now, how can I tell whether I was a man who dreamt that he was a butterfly, or whether I am a butterfly who dreams that she is a man? Between Chuang Chou and the butterfly, there must be differentiation. (Yet in the dream non differentiation takes place.) This is called interfusion of things. "

Chuang Chou (Ch. II)

"In this story, Chuang Chou dreams of a butterfly. Chuang Chou thus, is the subject, and the butterfly is the object. But, he says, it might be that the butterfly was dreaming itself as a man, making the butterfly the subject, and the man Chuang Chou himself, the object. Is it possible to make a distinction here between the subject and object?"

Creativity and Taoism
A Study of Chinese Philosophy,
Art, and Poetry
Chang Chung -yuan

Each viewer is an integral part of the artist's work, (referring personally to my own work, since from the conception of the piece accounts for the relationship between the viewer and myself) in that S/He is the receptor as well as the activator of the pieces. It is through the presence of the "Other," any form of communication is established, completed.

The viewer holds the position as the complement, an avenue, through multiple interpretations, give multiple dimensions to the work. If the work has the strength, (this is very subjective) the renewal and regenerating processes could be illimitable.

Inspiration given to an artist, Imagination breathed upon, breathed into him/her, (it is not by slight coincidence that the word, Imagination is said to have deep correspondence with the word Memory) insists upon a communion with the audience, to create a space where the audience are left free to imagine, to remember their own memories. (Again, within the context of my own work) In this way, the piece becomes an intimate sharing, a collective experience, of the collective memory and imagination...

"For most, the pursuit of literature and art is simply a vehicle of the Way (wen yi tsa Tao) which, besides the notion that poetry expresses the "intent of the heart (or mind) (shih yen chih), is the most widely quoted principle of Chinese poetics. And the Way is as long as the mind is deep, comprising, as Buddhist philosophers knew long before Jung, not only the personal "mind-system," but the huge memory storehouse of the "Universal Mind" in which "discriminations, desires, attachments, and deeds" have been collecting "since beginningless time" and which "like magician...causes phantom things and people to appear and move about" (lanka-catara-sutra)

Towards a New American Poetics

Ekbert Faas

The artist is relay, messenger from the Collective Sources. S/He attempts to find some collective key, associations, that would result in a kind of transformation

in the audience as well as Him /Herself.

The methods applied, the elements involved in this task are catalysts, chemicals chosen with precision and care, to bring about transformation, transcendence of elements, of energy.

"Of course the artist uses craft. But only in order to turn himself into a perfect medium for the self-expression of the life-force (chi) which breathes in him as in nature, thus it may take a painter years to learn how to trust his hand (hsin-shou) before his brush strokes turn into "obedient servants to the spirit of his object" so that the latter makes its own picture." Yet the aim of this disciplined spontaneity is the very transcendence of craft."

Towards a New American Poetics

Ekbert Faas

I have stated here, general introductions into personal principles. A kind of a preliminary "mind" that one follows as Thought before each action, each "making," as indispensable part of the process. To translate the actual procedures involved in conception and realization of my own work would encompass an entirely different set of vocabulary, means in constructing this thesis. The thesis would be an attempt at analysis, with basis on ideology, on mechanisms and operations of language and image, its social and psychological effects- ot, the thesis would be another "text" not distant from my own work's construction: enumerations, recitations, narrations of image and sound, pursuing that which is stated by Roland Barthes as "Plurality of entrances, the opening of networks the infinity of languages.."

For this time, however, the pure, magical states (before any "making" even begins,) the artist, given the gift of Medium, partaking in transformation processes captures eternal wonder. I cannot help but to express the overwhelming sensation that almost resembles a returning, an abandon, a salvation from the struggle of being human, to only the purest of pure



1. Words fail me in one sense and succeed me in another. There are manifold strains within the division of artistic labor. A lull is not leisure, not yet. Pause fills with suspense, anticipation, speculation, the edge of boredom—structures of feeling that take on a particular character and function within capitalism, or not. “Art can cease to be a report on sensations and become a direct organization of higher sensations. It is a matter of producing ourselves, and not things that enslave us.”¹ What are the lacunae of this claim?

2. A student says he wants to write his paper on martyrdom in Dictée—underneath the received formula he repeats of writing about X theme in Y text there emerges, over drafts, his attention’s pull to the gravitational center of the bravery of those resisting the current escalation of the US-funded Zionist genocide of Palestinians, following the rhyme across place and time with Cha’s anticolonial martyrs. Another asks me if any of the school’s administrators can see her essay after she submits it through the online course site. Really, she is not asking a question but depicting the conditions of surveillance that shape her utterance and education. It’s not that they are not saying what they mean, but rather that what is said contorts around, through, and against the imperial surrounds in order to arrive at what they mean. Trying to get at something at a distance from a distance through a medium. Tell us about “the martyr”?

3. Flash and static become refrains. They proliferate and withhold. There is another way to think about repetition. In speaking to the interpolative strictures of received language, syntax, grammar, a kind of make/believe takes place. Perhaps rehearsal. Her representative mouth, hand, breath is everywhere—a vessel for and giver of language, to us who now become vessels for its plenitude incommensurables. Called into position. What is the distinction between scrim and screen?

1. Guy Debord, “Theses on Cultural Revolution,” Internationale Situationniste, no. 1 (June 1958).

How does the unnoticed take effect?

On May 16, 1982, a course called “Video 119” began at Elizabeth Seton College in Yonkers, New York. The typed course outline names Cha as the instructor. The course was an introductory survey of video art. Its final assignment included an exercise that asked students to “analyze and decode an advertisement.” Students had to include the advertisement with their analysis and bring it to class. Cha’s questions began with what could be seen on the page. Students identified the product being sold and studied how the image was organized within the frame. They considered whether color enhanced or subdued the product and how the size and arrangement of the type contributed to the advertisement’s intention.

The exercise soon carried students beyond the page and into the position of the viewer. Cha asked how the message was “disseminated to the viewer” and whether the technique was “obvious or subliminal.” This situated students as within the audience the advertisement sought to reach. They considered its “desired effect” and whether that effect had been achieved. Cha ended the exercise by asking, “What is their underlying motivation?”¹

What travels across distance?

In the fall of 1984, Sook Lyol Ryu enrolled in the Women’s Studies program at Hunter College. A journalist who had been imprisoned under South Korea’s military regime, she worked mornings as a reporter and attended classes in the afternoon. Her young daughter remained in Korea in the care of Ryu’s mother.

For a presentation in Blanche Wiesen Cook’s class, Ryu wrote her first poem about the lives of Korean immigrant women and called it “Poem by a Yellow Woman.” Terrified at having to speak in English, she presented the poem before a class in which she was the only Asian woman. Audre Lorde was visiting that day. After hearing the poem, Lorde urged Ryu to join her poetry workshop. Beginning the following spring, Ryu studied with Lorde for three consecutive semesters and took her place at the large table around which Lorde taught. At that table, Lorde presented Ryu with a copy of Dictée.²

From what position do you look?

On September 15 and 16, 1982, Laura Kipnis’s video Your Money or Your Life was screened at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. The following month, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha spent a week at NSCAD as an artist in residence. Her review of the tape appeared in the first issue of News from the Front, a student feminist newsletter circulated within the school. Kipnis’s tape uses a mock game show called Textual Analysis to expose how a 1981 Time article turned street crime into a racial story. Cha follows this argument closely before directing

attention toward the people watching. “The audience for this tape, like its maker, is decidedly white and middle class,” she writes.

In Cha’s review, the conditions of viewing become part of the tape’s meaning. The work condemns the stereotype of the Black mugger, yet its own mugger carries a “ghetto blaster,” mimics Black speech, and delivers Marxist analysis through that stereotype. The tape also leaves out a Black woman’s perspective, while its only leading woman represents the fearful white middle class. Cha connects these contradictions to Halifax and to an art school whose students and audiences were predominantly white and middle class. Her review moves from the Time article to Kipnis’s tape and from the tape to the institution where it was viewed. It shows how a critique is shaped by the audience and institution in which it circulates.³

Who listens now?

In November 1983, on the first anniversary of Cha’s death, her family, friends, fellow artists, and mentors assembled a memorial artist’s book. Published privately by the “Family and Friends of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha,” it gathers photographs, letters, personal recollections, and visual and textual contributions about her life and work. In one passage, Cha’s mother, Hyung Soon Cha, quotes from a letter her daughter sent from Paris in 1978:

I think I am getting some answers from deep inside. It will be blown out some day. I believe it. It is not only for myself. I like to let other people know that there is the pure, lily-like simplicity and beauty somewhere in the world. Of course, I will get a lot of sufferings and heartache because of the crazy and strange world but I will be satisfied with illuminating my ideas like a clear mirror to one or two persons. . . . Anyway if I am good someone will listen to my voice.⁴

1. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, “Instruction—Elizabeth Seton College—Video Arts Course,” 1982. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha Archive, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, University of California, Berkeley, accession no. 1992.4.403.

2. Ryu recounts her encounter with Lorde and her three consecutive semesters in Lorde’s poetry workshop in chapter 1 of Sook-Lyol Ryu, Sook-Lyol Ryu’s New York Feminism Report 1984–1991 (Seoul: IFBOOKS, 2025). Her recollection that Lorde presented her with a copy of Dictée comes from an interview I conducted with Ryu on January 17, 2026, and does not appear in the published account.

3. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, “Review of Your Money or Your Life, by Laura Kipnis,” News from the Front, no. 1 (1982), published by the Student Union Women’s Committee, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. NSCAD Institutional Repository.

4. In Honor of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha (Family and Friends of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, 1983).

Within the grayscale of your films, I often wonder what season it is, and I always feel that I am witnessing something after or before the event itself. This does make me wonder if the event is even perceivable. I swear I did see the event once in the blink of an eye in your film Permutations (1976). It was about halfway through, when the film shifted from still images to moving ones. And then again, when I did actually see the subject (your sister) blink her eyes, and again when she is replaced by someone else for just an instant, like magic. But how did I know I was a witness? It was not in the moment, or from the moment, but from what came before, and only in the contrast of recollection against the present moment as that moment is pushed further away by each next frame of the film. What I saw before prepared me to realize that the image had turned into a real person, existing before me, persisting before me, between and across permutations.

Did you learn the significance of before from your parents, or was it from waiting? Did they know the lesson themselves in order to teach it? Is it a lesson carried by the hand? By the territory? How long would you pause and how quietly would you whisper until what you say isn’t spoken at all? Is that what we witnessed in your first film (Secret Spill [1974])? What tongue is it that speaks that film? I feel it call me to ask endlessly after it until inquiry is a state of being, rather than a plea. In that state, seeing is an act of creation—I see things that aren’t there, I ask with my eyes. Your first film teaches me how to do it—to ask by perceiving.

When I think cumulatively across all your films, I collect a method for assembling your final film, White Dust from Mongolia (1980), which was never finished. The state I see it in is like an editing-bay string-out where each reel of film is played end to end in chronological order. I see takes and retakes. I see the same train platform service many trains throughout a day. The repetition isn’t frustrating; rather, it builds. As a document they are different trains coming in one after the other, different shots back to back, but as a story in film they are all the same train: The same passengers rehearse for their great comeback, and you patiently give them take after take, chance upon chance, to get it right. The empty road remains so, only because, in this version, you cut away just before the main character (a version of your mother) appears walking briskly over the pavement. I watch this film as preparation and manifestation of what comes after it.

fainting spellfainting spell
fainting spellfainting spell
(after/towards Theresa Hak Kyung Cha)

every few minutes, she shifts a few meters closer. how many ways to say you err me?
you err me
you err me
you err me

surrender,
tectonic surrender, tender to the toll of gait
enter the ebb
enter the ebb the ground cannot hold you

ester-present, like flies drawn to rust oxidizing
in truant sun dewsewn leaf
ebbing slough she shifts you err me

do not look to me for sympathetic eyes any longer,
i will not return your gaze.
army of folly who mocks the dead
you know nothing of me—they said—the hungers i must attend.

at the precipice of stage no balm to soften petroglyphic sear
the dream of the audience is to be in it, surroundedsurrounded
an integrity toward the gift of witness strewn & fluttering surroundedsurrounded
(can it be held?)

we have never before seen such troublesome & successive relay.
we were forced to leave under drought & eclipse
backs turned to miracle
arid miracle

static-drenched static-drenched
heralding drill static-drenched static-drenched
crater gape jaggedgaseous
aural concerns strain the meandering,
hardly-writing eye authoring gnaw
slew closing fist credit scrawled to skin
slewfooted wane
certitude s merciless forgery, her collapse
natal misdirection run to swift seed,
horses egg her strange birth & navel recall
errant blood slings at taut equilibrium

42 a guest at our door succumbs to the quality of air,
& we have not managed to assess the repercussions.

truant sun flung to shade, stilling air
flung to shade, fulled integer
falling up tangled speech devotiondevotion
devotion
impromptuimpromptu
impromptu stilled breath
you air me
gasping brave sleep
relinquished to what remains, slumped in image alone
what remains, image alone
image
you err me

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha:
Multiple Offerings is on view
at ARTISTS SPACE
September 11 –
November 21, 2026.

The exhibition is organized by
BAMPFA and curated by Victoria
Sung, Phyllis C. Wattis Senior
Curator, with Tausif Noor, Curato-
rial Associate. The presentation
at Artists Space is organized by
Danielle A. Jackson, Curator,
and Nusheen Ghaemi, Adminis-
trative & Program Assistant.

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ARTISTS SPACE