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Goings On:
Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's Linguistic Art
by Hilton Als



A slide from the multimedia installation "Other Things Seen, Other Things Heard," from 1978. Art work by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha / Courtesy Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive

It's taken me some days to write about Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's show at Artists Space, because I didn't want to face the fact that she's no longer around to keep growing as an artist, a thinker, and a woman. Cha explored her deep interest in language among distinct cultures—including that of her native South Korea, where she grew up, and of the United States, where she moved, in 1962, when she was eleven—with video, performance, and multimedia installations. "Theresa Hak Kyung Cha: Multiple Offerings" (organized by the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, and on through Nov. 21) is the first retrospective of Cha's work in twenty-five years, and I can't imagine a more beautiful curatorial vision. Everything about it—placement, context, sound, moving image—works to create a kind of holistic portrait of an artist who was as devoted to image as she was to language, and to show the ways in which each amplifies the other.

Indeed, her mysterious and uncategorizable book "Dictee," from 1982, features a number of women talking, ranging from Joan of Arc to the artist's mother, who lived through Japanese rule, when Korean could not be spoken in public. In "Dictee," and in her performances, many of which are featured in "Multiple Offerings," Cha's and other women's voices rise out of bodies that have lived through some form of oppression to come out on the other side as whole and true. One walks away from this historic show deeply moved by its singularity, and angry: in 1982, shortly before her first exhibition at Artists Space was scheduled to open, Cha, who was working on a series of photographs about her time employed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, was murdered. —*Hilton Als*