

Unbidden Tongues #5:
Theresa Hak Kyung Cha,
Between the Teeth
November 28, 2021—January 22, 2022
Manifold Books, Amsterdam

It feels important to begin by stating, along the lines of other introductory observations throughout the *Unbidden Tongues* series, that this foreword is decidedly personal in intent. Considering that unrestrained utterance is a rallying call for the series of publications within which this exhibition on *Theresa Hak Kyung Cha* now stands—during its developmental stages, alternate names for the series were all of the rogue variety: *Unbridled Tongues*, *Unmeasured Tongues*, *Unmediated Tongues*, *Unbound Tongues*—it seems fitting that while preparing it, something became very clear: in formalising a reading of *Cha's* work, you run the risk of rendering the formal disavowal inherent to it conventional through over-theorisation.

It is of course no lie, however, that *Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's* work as a writer, poet, filmmaker and performance artist was inimitable when considering the contribution she made to her field(s), theoretical and otherwise. This very tension found in the theoretical rubbing up against the personal is something that plays out actively in *Cha's* work, intentionally framing it as a friction inherent to the binaries of sender and receiver, artist and audience, speaker and listener. As such, despite the aforementioned risk, it would be a disservice to fail to mention *Cha's* own rigorously academic background, one in which she impressively received four degrees in comparative literature, art practice, film theory-practice and video from the *University of California, Berkeley*, between 1969 and 1978, and edited a landmark anthology on cinema studies called *Apparatus* in 1980.

Berkeley's influence on *Cha* is important to state not only because it is the place where she made most of her work, but because the reading being put forward here is that her particular breed of conceptual art was uniquely personal while still being rigorously analytical and aesthetically consistent. For example, it was through the personal biography of her family and the experience of their continued displacement and migration—'[her] parents first went to *Manchuria* to escape the Japanese occupation [of *Korea*], then to *Seoul* to escape Soviet invasion, then to *Busan* to flee *North Koreans*, and finally to the *United States* to escape the South Korean dictatorship'¹—that *Cha* found her own language of (artistic) expression. When fleeing *Korea* to *Manchuria*, *Cha's* parents were banned from speaking *Korean*—an experience that undoubtedly became a grounding influence on *Cha* and her play with syntax, its rules and the spaces between.

Cha's most-known work, the decidedly genre-defying book *Dictée*—genre-defying in its compilation of, amongst other forms of textual organisation, prose, autobiography, historical account, administrative documents and medical diagrams—demonstrates her practice-wide commitment to slipping between languages, tones and styles in an attempt to find a way of speaking that is true to the experience of being between tongues. In the very first pages, under the section heading 'Disease'—a term used to describe a skilled female (artist) who performs monologues—*Cha* writes:

'She mimicks the speaking. That might resemble speech. (Anything at all.) Bared noise, groan, bits torn from words. Since she hesitates to measure the accuracy, she resorts to mimicking gestures with the mouth. The entire lower lip would lift upwards then sink back to its original place. She would then gather both lips and protrude them in a pout taking in the breath that might utter something. (One thing. Just one.)'²

When contemplating biography, at the heart of the matter is also the fact that, a day after the publication of *Dictée*, *Cha* was raped and murdered by the security

guard regularly stationed at the base of her husband's studio building. This biographical notation is often left out when speaking about *Cha*, assumedly through a desire to not sensationalise her story or overpower the work with the devastating circumstances of her death. But in her important essay on *Cha*, *Cathy Park Hong* insists on bringing this information forward, since her work was so much about the erasure of the immigrant experience—both in the way in which native-tongue expression is suppressed as well as through the objectification Asian women face, in this particular case, in the *United States*.³ In listening to *Hong*, and in believing in the necessity of the stories of women to go on the record—which, *Hong* also notes in her essay, was not something afforded to *Cha* aside from the court records compiled—this information is markedly not omitted here. Still, the focus remains a collection of text-based output produced by *Cha* between 1972 and 1981.

The output spans fully realised poetic works, to paratextual matter like artist statements and unrealised plans found in the form of filmic storyboards. In gathering together this material, the aim is to depict the ways in which *Cha* grappled with language in print—or handled it rather, since hands and their gestures are also so key to her work—and the many shapes it can take artistically. As she notes about her practice in an undated artist statement, '[my] concerns are experimented with in bookmaking, with written text and images, incorporated still within another structure, qualities inherent in the material, that of the book (page sequence, silences, pauses, time, space).' In sharing affection for this logic, here something experimented with (the presentation of her work) still within another structure (that of *Unbidden Tongues* as a publication series, or, *Manifold* as our host) presents a glimpse into her indefinable body of work.⁴

In the end, given that *Cha* was fluent in *Korean*, *French* and *English* and worked across the three languages, often all at once, not everyone has direct access to every word written or spoken by *Cha*. And while I wish I did, I understand it important that I don't. In slipping between three tongues *Cha* refused to be fully available—or rather, she refused to conform to an expected way of speaking and the dominant definition of legibility. This inability to linguistically comprehend often renders the language used object-like—in her concrete poetry the objectification of words also occurs through the use space, for example—forcing the violence of objectification faced as an Asian American, an immigrant, a woman, back onto the tool with which it is often waged in the first place: language itself.

While *Cha's* work seems delicate in many ways—a feeling generated by the use of semi-transparent fabric throughout her performance works and the composed precision with which she performed, as well as through her interest in the gestures made by hands and the movement of light cast by shadows, or the placement of lingering letters, suspended as if floating mid-page—there is an extreme assuredness and defiance in her utterances. For while silence and its counterparts are often misread as passivity, between the teeth, primed for speech, there lies the tongue.

1 *Cathy Park Hong*, 'Portrait of an Artist,' in *Minor Feelings* (New York: Random House, 2020), 159–60.

2 *Theresa Hak Kyung Cha*, *Dictée* (New York: Tanam Press, 1982).

3 *Cathy Park Hong*, *Minor Feelings*.

4 To further unravel her practice, a screening focusing on her video works has been organised in collaboration with *Martha Jager*—who found a letter written by *Cha* in the archive of *de Appel*—and an ongoing reading group dedicated to her prose writing has been organised with *Sara Giannini* and *Arnisa Zego*.

Panel 1 (left to right):

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Narrative Account of Career II*, 1982, reproduction of typewritten text, 8.5 x 11 inches.

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Artist's Statement/Summary of Work*, approximately 1979, reproduction of typewritten text, two pages, each 8.5 x 11 inches.

Panel 2:

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Missing Page*, 1976, typewritten text on paper, 8.25 x 11.75 inches.

Panel 3 (left to right):

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Re Dis Appearing*, 1977, two-page master script with handwritten additions (including installation floor plan), three pages in total, each 8.5 x 11 inches.

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *A Ble Wail*, 1975, text stenciled in ink on burlap, 22 x 7.5 inches, 28 black-and-white photographs, 11.5 x 8.25 inches, manuscript. Documentation of performance, performed at the Wirth Ryder Gallery, UC Berkeley

Panel 4 (left to right):

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Earth*, 1976, artist's book, photocopies bound in handmade paper cover with calligraphy written in black ink, 44 pages, single page 8.5 x 11 inches.

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Perte Loss*, 1976, manuscript, three sheets, typewritten text on paper, handwritten additions in pencil, page three 8.5 x 11 inches. Work not realised.

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *From Dream to Awake*, not dated, typewritten text on paper, 8.5 x 11 inches.

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *L'Image Concrete feuille L'Objet Abstrait*, 1976, artist book, black press type on paper, twelve sheets of paper, single page 8.25 x 11.75 inches.

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Perte Loss*, 1976, manuscript, three sheets, typewritten text on paper, handwritten additions in pencil, page one 8.5 x 11 inches. Work not realised.

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Untitled (the sand grain story)*, 1977, black-and-white photograph and typewritten text on paper, photocopy, 8.15 x 14 inches.

Panel 5 (left to right):

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Untitled (Poem to Mother and Father)*, not dated, stenciled ink on cloth, 18.5 x 27 inches.

Translation: My father gave me life,
my mother brought me up.
Were it not for the two of them,
my life would not have been possible.
Where could I ever repay them
for their loving kindness,
infinite as the sky.

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Fin De Partis*, not dated, script for sound work, typewritten text on three pieces of paper, each 8.5 x 11 inches.

Panel 6:

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Untitled (Hand Hearing)*, 1976, stenciled ink on burlap, edges sewn with thread, 14.5 x 14 inches.

Audio:

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Monologue*, 1977, typewritten text on paper, 8.5 x 11 inches, aired on KPFA Radio Station, Berkeley.

