About the Cover

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha: *Aveugle Voix*, 1975; performance. Photo: Trip Callaghan, courtesy University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive.

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All that remains are eight black and white photographs, now in the possession of the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive. They were taken in 1975 at 63 Bluxome Street in San Francisco during a performance of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Aveugle Voix* (Cha, 1975). The artist is barefoot and dressed in white.

Squatting, she ties a long strip of white cloth around her eyes, with the word ‘VOIX’ [‘voice’] stenciled upon it. Around her mouth, she stretches another strip of cloth, this one imprinted with the word ‘AVEUGLE’ [‘blind’]. As the cloth conforms to her face, the word becomes less legible, suggesting ‘vœu’ [‘vow’] and ‘ugly.’ Cha then unfurls a banner with a column of words that might be read in either direction: WORDS–FAIL–ME–SANS–MOT–SANS–VOIX–AVEUGLE–GESTE (*Re-Act Feminism*, 2013). Having stretched this cloth on the ground, Cha squats over it, touches FAIL, cradles her head over ME.

What is lost is movement, though the artist’s long, dark hair suggests it even in these still images. Cha, who had learned traditional Korean dance in her childhood and practiced *tai chi chuan* daily, had a ‘trancelike... floating’ quality of movement according to those who saw her perform in various pieces (Lewallen, 2001, 7). The smoothness of her physical motion must have contrasted with her depictions of writing and speech as fragmented. In her films, live performances, artists’ books, avant garde writing, and *objets d’art*, Cha pressed language to its breaking point. Fluent in Korean, English, and French, and familiar with Latin, Cha created works that deliberately stuttered, riffing on homonyms, errors of transcription, and creative mistranslations. As the filmmaker and writer Trinh T. Min-ha notes of Cha’s obsession with the graphic aspect of speech, ‘[e]ngaging language as simultaneously seen and heard, her writing plays up the arbitrary relation between the sound of a word, its visual spelling, its multiple referents, and its foreign mate in translation’ (Min-ha, 2001, 35).

Cha’s archive offers a series of translations: through the space of a studio, across vast geographies, between alphabets, languages, and articulations of mouth and tongue, from flesh to screen to page. Her work reminds us insistently of the ghostly, shattered past, of ancestors, martyrs, and legendary women who were made silent, often by violence. Cha uses disruptions of language to channel their voices and revive their stories. In *Dictée* and throughout her work, she draws strength out of vulnerability, presence out of absence. Her many translations are part of an ongoing labor of recovery, one that uncovers the paradox of pain. The woman who binds her eyes and mouth continues to see and speak, just as a saint’s sacrifice leads to her immortality.

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha was murdered in New York City on November 5, 1982, just a few weeks before the publication of *Dictée*. She left behind a substantial body of work, one that continues to influence writers, performance artists, and critics. She also left a sense of tragic loss and violation. In a poem of mourning for her sister, Bernadette Hak Eun Cha Silveus writes: ‘Any reference to you / Would surely cause the words that would form upon my lips to unravel’ (Cha Silveus, 2001, 51). And yet it was in unraveling languages that Cha spoke most clearly. Skipping across tongues, her voice, once silenced, persists.

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