Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s DICTEE
A Marathon Reading

Saturday, December 4, 2021, 1 to 6 p.m.
Meldman Family Cinematic Arts Park
University of Southern California

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO
- Theresa Hak Kyung Cha (1951–1982) was a groundbreaking artist who worked in text, performance, and video.
- Dictee, released in 1982, is Cha’s most famous work. The experimental book blends elements of the novel, poetry, autobiography, and cultural critique.
- This event marks the 70th anniversary of Cha’s birth. Deaf and Hearing volunteers, including USC students, will read Dictee in its entirety, simultaneously in spoken language and ASL.

“Dictee’s mix of narrative, poetry, and images destabilizes historical and biographical narratives in favor of a concentration on the workings of language.”—Timothy Yu, poet

THERESA HAK KYUNG CHA

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha (1951–1982) was an artist who worked in multiple mediums, including writing, performance, and video.

Cha was born in South Korea in 1951, and emigrated to the United States with her family in 1963. She spent her teen years in San Francisco, and studied literature and art at UC Berkeley at the height of the 1960s protest movements, earning two BAs, an MA, and an MFA.

Cha began her career as an artist in the mid-1970s, producing boundary-pushing works in multiple mediums. She taught video art at Elizabeth Seton College, was awarded an artist residency at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, worked in the design department at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and was an editor and writer at Tanam Press, which published Dictee. She married the photographer Richard Barnes in 1982.

Dictee is Cha’s most famous work, and we can’t know what this powerful artist might have done next. A week after Dictee was published, Cha was raped and murdered. She was 31.

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha: Untitled (candle performance), 1973; black-and-white video, sound, 25 min.; University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive; gift of the Theresa Hak Kyung Cha Memorial Foundation.
DICTEE: MULTILINGUAL, MULTIGENRE, AND MORE

A dictée is a type of exercise often used for learning French. It involves listening to a speaker, and writing down what you hear. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s book Dictee is written in Korean, English, French, Latin, and Chinese, and language itself is one of its main subjects. Cha was fluent in Korean, English, and French, and used multiple languages and experimental approaches to text in Dictee as a way of exploring language, meaning, power, and more. Several critics have interpreted Dictee’s multilingualism as decolonizing or anti-imperial.

Dictee is not only multilingual, it is also multigenre. Is it a novel? Poetry? Memoir? A diary? It has been called auto-ethnography, and mostly it has been called a hybrid or multigenre experimental work. Some scholars have noted that Cha used techniques from film (e.g., rough cuts or quick cuts; visual images for exposition), and indeed Cha worked in video as well as text, and some of her core artistic influences were filmmakers.

SOME ARTISTS WHO INFLUENCED THERESA HAK KYUNG CHA

Marguerite Duras
Stéphane Mallarmé
Samuel Beckett
Carl Dreyer
Alain Resnais
Chris Marker

SOME ARTISTS WHO WERE INFLUENCED BY THERESA HAK KYUNG CHA

Elaine Castillo
Cathy Park Hong
Jane Wong

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- What are the major themes of Dictee?
- How does the simultaneous reading of Dictee in multiple languages relate to the subject matter or form of the text?
- Why do you think Cha structured Dictee around stories of mythological and historical figures? Why do you think she chose the figures she did?
- Why do some critics interpret Dictee’s multilingualism as decolonizing or anti-imperial?
- What is the relationship between language and power?

IF YOU LIKED THIS EVENT, YOU MIGHT WANT TO CHECK OUT:

- Gyopo | gyopo.us
- Kaya Press | kaya.com
- Electronic Arts Intermix | eai.org
- 1/21/22 at USC: Art, Identity, and Power: An Evening with MC Rocky Rivera and Muralist Audrey Chan
DISCOVER MORE AT THE USC LIBRARIES

MELISSA MILLER of the USC Libraries selected the following resources to help you learn more about this event. Electronic resources are accessible through the search bar on the USC Libraries homepage at libraries.usc.edu but may require the user to log in using their USC credentials.

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