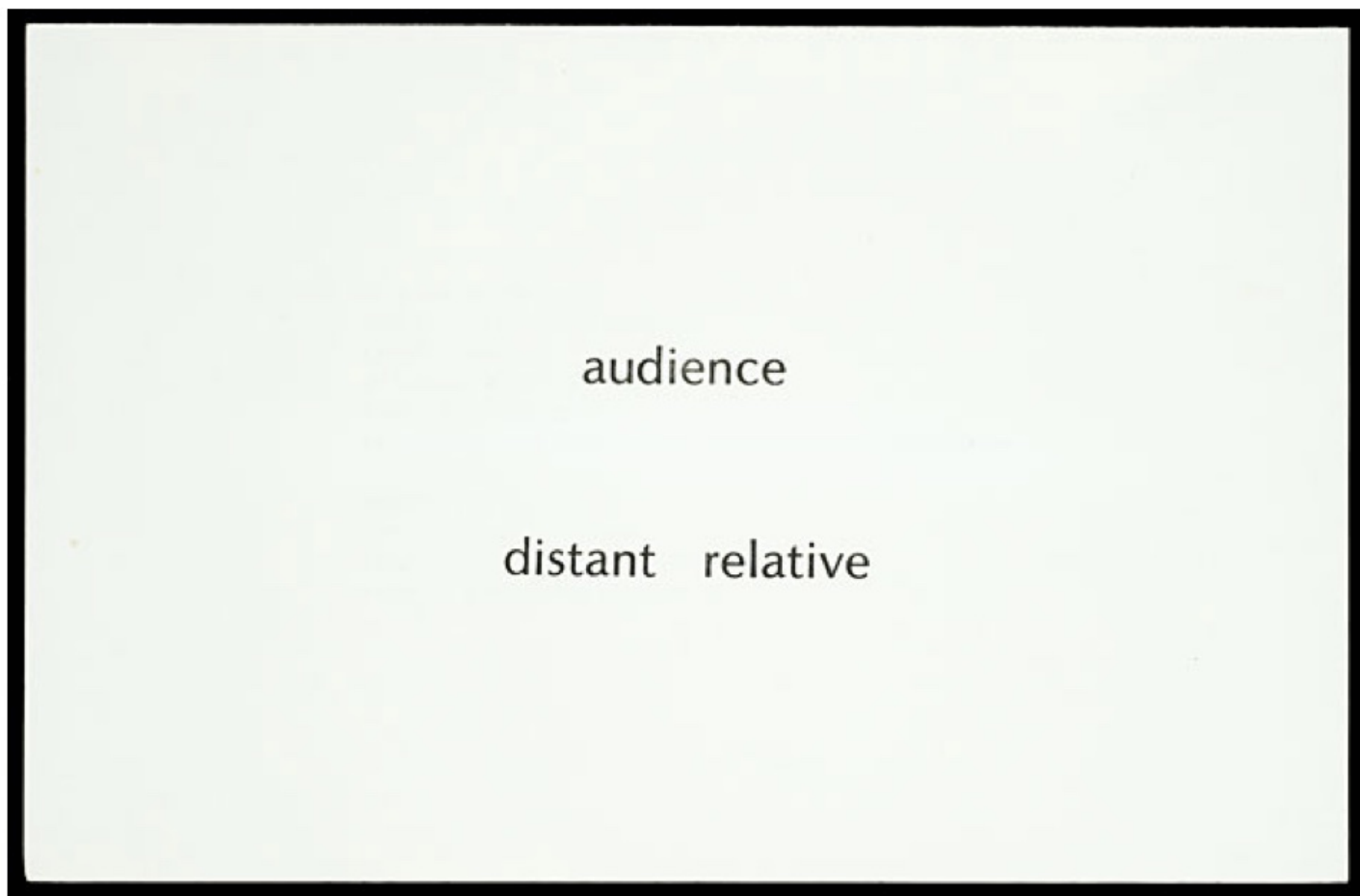


A Distance That I Cannot Seem to Close

BY DIANA SEO HYUNG LEE ([HTTPS://MOMUS.CA/AUTHOR/DIANA-SEO-HYUNG-LEE/](https://momus.ca/author/diana-seo-hyung-lee/)) · NOVEMBER 8, 2022



Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, "Audience / Distant Relative," 1977. Courtesy Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive's Cha Collection, Online Archive of California (OAC).

this is a letter read aloud
upon opening it
you hear the sender's voice as your eyes move over the
words. you, the receiver, seeing the sender's image
speak over the
voice

—Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *audience/distant relative*

(<https://momus2.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Screenshot-2022-11-08-at-10.09.51-AM.png>)

My quiet mother, my Umma, used to write me letters, then regarding them, say, “I don’t speak well but I can write better. Without the listener in front of me, my writing conveys my true intent.” There was a remove—a sense that she wanted to speak without input, to address me without *my* input. While knowing what she meant, I still longed for more of Umma in time’s immediacy.

I sent her flowers the first day her nail salon’s shutters opened following the shooting in Atlanta. She sent me a message saying, “Thank you, that made me happy.” Hopeful that the floral arrangements would cause temporary amnesia for what we were all thinking of during that time, neither she nor I could admit that they were meant to serve as a talisman to keep her and her workers safe. But we never spoke about these things directly. While I noticed cautious glances from people spotting me, an East Asian woman, after a man pushed an Asian American woman from my neighborhood in front of a moving subway, I did not hear from my mother. All I could do was be scrupulous about my media consumption in an attempt to protect my own heart.

When press releases began arriving in my inbox with descriptions such as “exhibition commemorating the death of Asian women in spa shooting” or “exhibition to provide space to honor and mourn murdered Asian woman,” I felt cornered. It was not that I saw these efforts as harboring any ill intentions. But receiving these emails left me wondering about the strangeness of time lived by artists and writers of color. We are asked to translate the present as it pertains to our identity, or to give homage to those who went before us. Both paradigms are entangled in a colonialist impulse, merging closer with production and productivity—the word “mourning” is used, but there is little time for it. I started yearning for works of art, exhibitions, and writing that were forms of delay. I remembered Umma’s letters to me.



(https://momus2.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/1-Kay-Sekimachi-Ogawa-II-Forrest-L-Merrill-Collection_1-1.jpg)

Kay Sekimachi, "Ogawa II," 1969. © Kay Sekimachi.

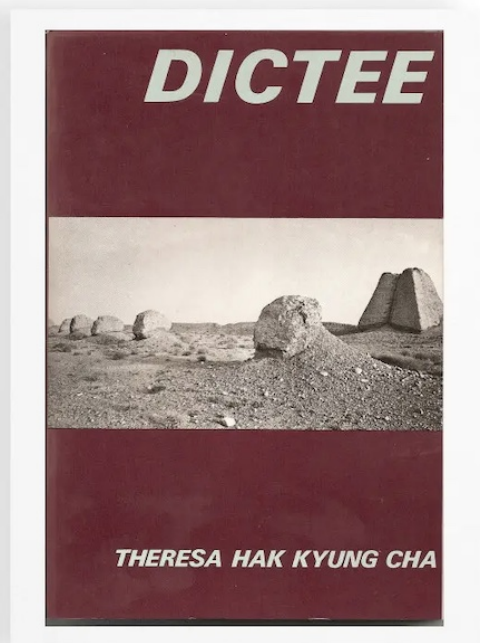
Even if I didn't go immediately, I still went to see the exhibitions I was invited to as a form of solidarity, or out of curiosity; or perhaps I was also searching for something. While it was not one of those exhibitions, I was encouraged when, just before it closed, I saw *No Monument: In the Wake of the Japanese American*

Incarceration(<https://www.noguchi.org/museum/exhibitions/view/no-monument-in-the-wake-of-the-japanese-american-incarceration/>) at the Isamu Noguchi

Museum, curated by Genji Amino and Christina Hiromi Hobbs. I must have been expecting the sense of heroism often present in an exhibition

that takes a traumatic moment as its subject, and for this show, it was the incarceration of more than one hundred and twenty thousand Japanese Americans by the US government 80 years ago, under Executive Order 9066. I was relieved and refreshed not to detect heroism anywhere. The presentation, while including works by the well-known Isamu Noguchi and Ruth Asawa, was modestly scaled and invited a quiet and interior experience, with a sense of light, negative space, and transparency permeating throughout. Kay Sekimachi's sculpture *Ogawa II (1969)*, made of nylon monofilament, glass beads, and clear plastic tubes, hung in the center of the gallery, its curved, bodily presence not so much occupying space as negotiating with the air and light around it, like the filmy afterimage caught in one's eyes filtering everything one sees. This idea of what one has seen before embedding itself in one's current vision—this was the way I understood *No Monument*. The exhibition was not a memorial, but it allowed for what is called history to stretch out, take up room, and become activated in one's present.

Ten years ago, when I was writing my master's thesis on Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, my constant preoccupation was over whether I had conflated Cha's tragic death with my interpretation of her work. Did her death make her oeuvre ripe for exploitation and projection—by others and me? Without many art ancestors for me to name, it was imperative that my encounter with Cha aspired toward self-reflective honesty. Most of all, I wanted my writing to do her justice.



(<https://momus2.wpenginpowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/dictee-cover.jpg>)

“Dictee,” published in 1982. Credit: Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center.

Those who know Cha’s seminal book

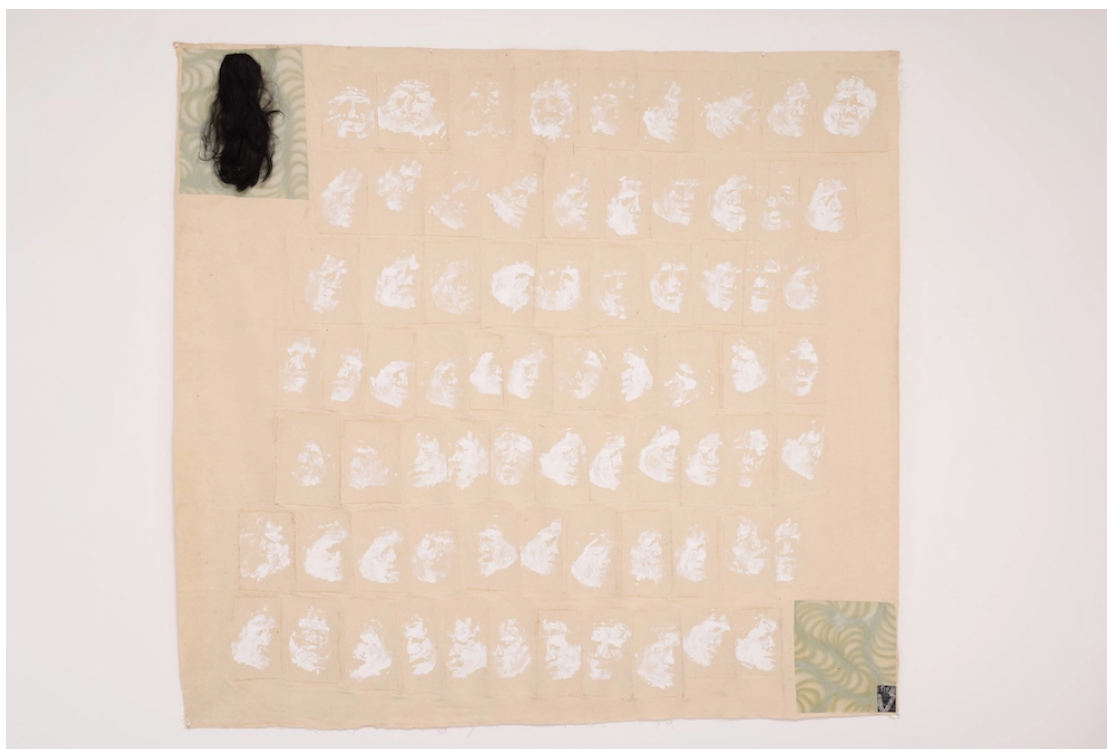
Dict(<https://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520390485/dictee>)e(<https://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780>

(1982) will be familiar with her as an artist who looked at language and history as form, structure, and content—and lurking within her relationship with them was an awareness of loss and erasure. However, Cha’s work gains its power precisely in her ability to play with the flickering between loss and presence, never fully succumbing to one or the other. In Cha’s video *Mouth to Mouth* (1975), in which a mouth, close-up, is shown mouthing the Korean vowels while video static obscures the view, one could focus on the loss of language over time. But one could also see this as a resistance to loss, to keep the language inside one’s throat, one’s body, for longer, and not letting the sound escape.

Mouth to Mouth was on view in *Dead Lecturer / distant relative: Notes from the Woodshed* (<https://wallach.columbia.edu/exhibitions/dead-lecturer-distant-relative#:~:text=Dead%20Lecturer%20%2F%20distant%20relative%3A%20Notes,70s%2C%20and> (<https://wallach.columbia.edu/exhibitions/dead-lecturer-distant-relative#:~:text=Dead%20Lecturer%20%2F%20distant%20relative%3A%20Notes,70s%2C%20and> *1950-1980* (<https://wallach.columbia.edu/exhibitions/dead-lecturer-distant-relative#:~:text=Dead%20Lecturer%20%2F%20distant%20relative%3A%20Notes,70s%2C%20and> and curated by Genji Amino, at the Wallach Art Gallery at Columbia University through October 1, 2022. What initially drew me to this exhibition was a hope to see more of what I had experienced through Amino's curation in *No Monument* and the reference in its title to Cha's *audience/distant relative*. As well as from Cha's 1977 artist book, the Wallach exhibition took its title from the 1964 poetry collection *The Dead Lecturer* by LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka) and painter Jack Whitten's posthumous collection of writings, *Notes from the Woodshed* (2018). The encyclopedic (and therefore at times disorienting) exhibition had on view works by over fifty Asian American and African American artists and poets from the generations following the Second World War. While the show may have grappled with alternative vocabularies as well as the failure and limits of art history, to say the exhibition dealt with under-recognized or forgotten artists would be missing the point. There were indeed recognizable names such as Martin Puryear, Adrian Piper, Howardena Pindell, and Jack Whitten, but the exhibition specifically disavowed the binaries of recognized and under-recognized, remembered and forgotten. The stakes and questions were more generative and moved toward the qualities and approaches of the works themselves, asking: what about them posed problems for their visibility? While it seems subtle, this is a significant distinction, since that question is not about history as the agent that has

failed to account for the works, but the works *themselves* teetering on the edge of history.

My preoccupation with Cha found its companion and clarity in *Dead Lecturer*, because what I was asking myself then was around the question and quality of anachronism and delay embedded in a work of art, alongside the life of the artist. This anachronism and delay are not about being old-fashioned or late, but about being contemporaneous in the way Giorgio Agamben frames it in his [essay](https://eastbayprisonersupport.files.wordpress.com/2009/09/what-is-an-apparatus.pdf)(<https://eastbayprisonersupport.files.wordpress.com/2009/09/what-is-an-apparatus.pdf>) “What Is the Contemporary?” He writes, “Contemporariness is, then, a singular relationship with one’s own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it. More precisely, it is *that relationship with time that adheres to it through disjunction and an anachronism.*”



(https://momus2.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Copy-of-Villa_UntitledFace-Prints..._c2979.jpg)

Carlos Villa, "Untitled (Face Print with Wig and Photograph)," c. 1979.

Courtesy Columbia University's Wallach Art Gallery.

While a concept such as a contemporary in the context of the art-historical canon and the art world has been a violent, exclusionary one, Agamben's text allows me to expand my understanding that certain artists reside and move within this disjunction contemporaneously. The kind of dialectic that is present in Cha's work, between loss and presence, and Agamben's notion of being contemporaneous through disjunction, is present throughout *Dead Lecturer*. I cannot help but think of Fred Eversley's *Untitled (parabolic lens)* (<https://www.fredeversley.com/historicallenses>) (1970). The three-color, three-layer cast-polyester sculpture looks like a transparent lens into what is behind it, but what is behind appears grasped by the sculpture, engulfed in its orb. This effect creates another image: one that is almost more alluring, or one that makes you rethink, or even forget, what may actually be behind the sculpture. Carlos Villa's painting *Untitled (Face Prints with Wig and Photograph)* (<https://www.anglimtrimble.com/artists/carlos-villa>) (ca. 1979), with its repetition of small face prints on canvas, both record the body while obliterating it, and depict the body while obscuring it. The self seems trapped inside the image while also dodging away from it. These works *articulate* marginality—they are not marginal.

I left the show thinking about Jessica Hagedorn's poem "Sorcery" (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/58125/sorcery>) (1993), displayed in the same nook as Cha's *Mouth to Mouth*. Hagedorn writes, "there are some people i know / whose beauty / is a crime. / who make you so crazy / you don't know / whether to throw yourself / at them / or kill them. / which makes / for permanent madness." I, too, have known and still experience this push and pull when encountering

works by artists that cause madness through their beauty, their unnamable magic. And my Umma, how I long to collide with and be near her, yet, in her presence, I am maddened by our distance that I cannot seem to close. *Dead Lecturer* existed in the place between love and madness, between surrender and reservation, between timeliness and lateness, allowing me to linger, feel around the walls and get to know their tactility with all of my senses. Umma, who has woken up at dawn for the last twenty years, to cook, clean, then work, and return home to clean, and finally sleep. Her letters, which I misunderstood as her withdrawal from and denial of me, I can begin to see as her form of resistance and reservation, in order to speak to me beyond time's persistence. Delayed yet here.

the in-between-time: from when a sound is made
 to when it returns as an echo
 no one knows if it was heard,
 when it was heard
 when it would be heard
 if ever at all
 but in continues on and on and on
 maybe thousand years

someone's memory
 tale
 legend
 poem
 dream

—Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *audience/distant relative*

(<https://momus2.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Screen-Shot-2022-11-08-at-12.47.32-PM.png>)

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