



ART OF ENGAGEMENT

VISUAL POLITICS IN CALIFORNIA AND BEYOND

PETER SELZ

WITH AN ESSAY BY SUSAN LANDAUER

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YONG SOON MIN
DEFINING MOMENTS
(NO. 4 OF 6), 1992
Gelatin silver print,
20 x 16 in. Courtesy
of the artist.

California, Berkeley, in 1979; lived in New York for several years; and now serves as the chair of the department of studio art at the University of California, Irvine. Her work consists mostly of installations that deal with issues of colonization, war, cultural identity, feminism, global politics, and her own body. In *Defining Moments* (1992), a six-part photographic ensemble, Min conflates crucial moments in Korean history with her own life by etching significant dates and words on photographs of her body. The first image presents this commingled history through a series of dates spiraling out of her belly. The chain begins with 1953, the year of Min's birth, which coincided with the end of the Korean War. We then encounter 4/19/60, the date of the popular uprising that overthrew Syngman Rhee's dictatorship, which made it possible for Min's family to leave the country; then 5/19/80, the date of the Kwangju rebellion and massacre, in which many students were killed—an experience that politicized the young Min; and finally 4/29/92, Min's birthday, the date riots in Central Los Angeles destroyed much of Koreatown, and the date that motivated her to produce *Defining Moments*. In the same image, we see the word HEARTLAND written across Min's chest and OCCUPIED TERRITORY on her arms. Other images in this series present just her head and shoulders—again with the word HEARTLAND on her chest and the letters DMZ (for demilitarized zone) etched on her forehead. In each a different image covers Min's torso: U.S. soldiers making their way across Korean rice paddies; Korean soldiers advancing on students during the Kwangju rebellion; a view of Mount Baektu, the legendary birthplace of the Korean people, located in what is now North Korea. *Defining Moments* literally embodies Min's personal trauma about the separation of the Korean people and her hope for unification.

In her poignant installation *DMZ XING* (1994), Min worked with etched and mirrored glass, steel grating, blinking red lights, and color photos. Commissioned by Real Art Wars in Hartford, Connecticut, this piece evolved from interviews with South-



east Asian refugee families like her own. The result is an eloquent photo documentation about “the parallels and intersections between the histories and legacies of the Korean and Vietnam wars, the Cold Wars that the United States lost.”⁸

Min's installation *Bridge of No Returns* (1997) visualizes geography and history. It consists of a permeable wall/fence, made of aluminum and wood and shaped in an “S” curve, which resembles the yin/yang symbol at the center of the Korean flag. The title refers to a bridge at the thirty-eighth parallel, where a prisoner exchange occurred at the end of the Korean War. Each soldier was given an irreversible choice of returning to either South or North Korea. The bridge was then closed and guarded on both sides. For her installation, Min covered the sides of a fence with magnets displaying words that refer to the cruelty of the division. She has commented: “To me this bridge has come to epitomize the absurd, yet undeniable reality of divisions—geopolitical, ideological, cultural.

et al.—which render border crossing hazardous, even an oxymoron.”⁹

Like Yong Soon Min (with whom she was friends), Theresa Hak Kyung Cha (1951–1982) left Korea as a child. After spending two years in Hawaii, she came with her family to San Francisco at age thirteen. She went to Catholic school, studied the classics, then enrolled at the University of California, Berkeley, where she earned a degree in comparative literature before immersing herself in the study and practice of art. Language and art were to be fused in her work as a conceptual artist. At the University Art Museum in Berkeley she saw exhibitions of conceptual artists such as Terry Fox, Howard Fried, Lynn Hershman, Tom Marioni, and Linda Montano; at the Pacific Film Archive, where she worked, she grew interested in the cinema of Marguerite Dumas, Jean-Luc Godard, and Alain Resnais. Among the writers she read, Stéphane Mallarmé and Samuel Beckett found the greatest echo in her work.

While still a graduate student, in 1975, Cha performed *Aveugle Voix*. She appeared with a headband marked *voix* (voice) tied over her eyes and another band, marked *aveugle* (blind), covering her mouth. She then unrolled a scroll that read, line for line: “*aveugle / voix / sans / mot / sans / me*” (blind voice, without word, without me). Or these words could be read in reverse. In addition, there were the words on her head—an almost infinite play with words seemed possible. Did she mean “me without word” or “word without me”? “Blind without a voice” or “a voice that is blind”? And what about her female body with its long, black hair (so often associated with Asian women)? Image, language, the artist’s self were all interlaced and made to shift.

This early work is paradigmatic of Cha’s other performance pieces, which often combined slide projections, her own voice, and herself as the performer. Versed in deconstruction theory and fluent in Korean, English, and French, she played with words, questioning and deconstructing their meanings in a variety of media, including video and film. In 1982 she published her book *Dictée*—a hybrid, written as



TERESA HAK
KYUNG CHA
AVEUGLE VOIX, 1975

Performance still (detail),
90½ × 6¾ in. University
of California, Berkeley
Art Museum, Gift of the
Theresa Hak Kyung Cha
Memorial Foundation.

a dictation, an exercise, in English, French, Latin, and Korean.¹⁰ Combining personal and family history with a re-visioning of Korean history, it includes poetry and suggestions for a film script, as well as multiple voices. The Greek Muses, Saint Thérèse, Joan of Arc, and Korean heroes all make appearances. At times the references are quite specific, especially in relation to the artificial division of Korea. Cha “tells of the Korean War and the arbitrary and externally imposed separation of the peninsula as a result. The ‘Melpomene/Tragedy’ section begins not with narration, but a simple map showing North Korea and South Korea, divided by the DMZ.”¹¹ Overall, however, Cha writes in an elusive voice, using repetition and fragmented recitation. She leaves it to the reader to assimilate the language: “It should be understood that the liberated voice will necessarily confront, disturb, demand that listeners even alter ways of hearing and being.”¹²

Hanh Thi Pham, like Yong Soon Min and Theresa