

“flipping through pages keeping a record of time” — Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and Jimmy Robert

by Alper Turan

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Jimmy Robert, *Untitled*, 2005; installation view from “flipping through pages keeping a record of time,” 2024, PARTICIPANT INC, New York. Image: Daniel Kukla; Collection of Hugo Brown

Walking into “flipping through pages keeping a record of time” feels like a necessary pause in the fall of 2024, in the pre-election atmosphere in the US. Outside, the city brims with uneasy vigilance, the anxiety of choosing between the worse and the worst. In here, the air shifts: a quiet pulse seems to radiate from the artworks as if the room itself is holding its breath. Curated by Toronto-based Jacob Korczynski, the exhibition places Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and Jimmy Robert into a conversation that spans decades, continents, and languages. Together, their practices unfold the limits and possibilities of the page, transforming it into a space for gestures, erasures, and interruptions, where meanings expand and layers accumulate. The effect of the whole is a quiet resistance—not another urgent declaration, not another blunt warning, but a murmuring. Language refuses containment in the end; materials push beyond their perceived limits. The exhibition offers reading as an act that simultaneously rewrites the past work, and writing as an act that anticipates its own future reading, where both fold into what has been and what is yet to come.

Guided by an intuitive spark, Korczynski recognized Cha and Robert’s shared concerns: both were trilingual; each used and transformed the page through performance and text; and each insisted on language as a tactile, transgressive medium. This resonance propelled him across archives, from the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive—where Cha’s estate is held—to Jimmy Robert’s early studio documentation. In choosing only Robert’s pre-2010 work—before the curator ever met him—Korczynski constructs a parallel historicity, preventing the late Cha’s foreshortened output from being read solely as “the past” and Robert’s as “the present.” Instead, he casts the artists as contemporaries in an ongoing conversation on how the page can be folded, obscured, or caressed into new ways of seeing and reading. Korczynski’s approach attends to the ephemeral and improvised nature of both practices.

Cha (1951–1982), a Korean American artist, writer, and filmmaker, explored the materiality of language, often treating the page as an extension of the body. Her experimental writing, most notably in *Dictee* (1982), collapsed linguistic, historical, and personal time, marking reading as a sensory and embodied experience. Robert (b. 1975), a French artist born in Guadeloupe and based in Paris, similarly invests in the page as both material and conceptual ground. Working across performance, sculpture, film, and drawing, Robert treats paper as a surrogate for the body—one that bends, creases, crumples, and resists easy legibility.

The exhibition unfolds as a careful choreography of surface, volume, and movement of paper. Robert’s subtle, angular wall drawing near the entrance (*Untitled, 2008–2024*) resembles folded paper, invisible at first glance, but becoming evident as you exit the space later. On the same wall hangs Cha’s pencil-on-paper work *Untitled (le 22 juillet)* (1976), in which lines of text are repeated to form double stanzas. In both works, the handwriting-cum-drawing appears faint, vulnerable, and delicate, something between inscription and erasure as the imprints appear to fade as the surface absorbs them. For Cha’s works on paper, viewers are compelled to lean in patiently, scrutinizing the textured surfaces, becoming acutely aware of the physical, labour-intensive process of writing—a performance of the hand itself. The show’s shifting architecture also becomes an instrument of constraint and release: the open entryway; a semi-transparent projection in the centre; a floating screen through which light filters; walls layered with unframed, unbound, pinned, and folded works on/made of paper. At the back of the space, a restrictive passage-way directs the body’s engagement. Every week, multi-disciplinary artist Raymond Pinto performs Robert’s *Object/My affection* (2007–2024) between these two narrow walls. Informed by the gestures in Robert’s related film, Pinto’s body intersects with the projection as they press, lean, and slide against the surfaces. The performance unfolds as a live negotiation between image and body—gesture becoming inscription, the body becoming a page.

Cha’s works anchor the exhibition: her texts always summon the body and mirror Robert’s performances and gestures in their own ways. Her typewritten texts undermine mechanical regularity through breath-like line breaks, the textual hesitation of repeated words, and disruptive spacing. They suggest the embodied struggle of language slipping, being held, and being displaced. *Untitled (Empreinte)* (1976) is a rupture, and it is the only warning of the show: “america land of excess deliberate mirror images upon itself / wanting to be erased and be no more reflected.”

The exhibition constantly stages the tension between the material fragility of paper/body and the force of inscription, which contours and contains meaning. Robert’s signature sculptural gesture—a tall plywood board leaning precariously against a wall—returns in *Untitled* (2009), this time bearing a translucent sheet. Where the wood in his other works subjected paper to bruising by its full weight, the page now appears partially freed—only to be taped in place, still hovering between an illusionary release and inexorable confinement. Floating pages, another signature gesture for Robert, also appear in his projected film *Emma/Mystique* (2001), where a friend tries to hold the dissemination of pages caught in the wind. The motif references Hokusai’s *Ejiri in Suruga Province* (c. 1832), later reimagined in Jeff Wall’s *A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai)* (1993). Where Hokusai captures the fleeting chaos in wood-block print and Wall monumentalizes it through staged photography, Robert returns to the image as a meditation on the possible failures of materiality: a persistent exploration of how representation, like papers in the wind, resists stability, always teetering on the edge of disintegration.

Yet, it is Robert’s aluminum sheets in the sculpture *Untitled* (2005), mimicking windswept paper on a cardboard box, that holds the exhibition’s most profound sense of precariousness, and its victory. Lia Gangitano, director and founder of PARTICIPANT INC, warns that they are not paper but metal. This materiality transforms perception. The sheets appear weightless, their form an attempt to hold something that cannot be held—an impossible stillness. They mark the exhibition’s unresolved gesture: a resistance to containment, a refusal to let language, movement, or material settle into fixed form.

“flipping through pages keeping a record of time” ran from 6 September to 3 November 2024 at PARTICIPANT INC, New York City. Guest curated by Jacob Korczynski.

About contributors

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Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and Jimmy Robert *"flipping through pages keeping a record of time"* at PARTICIPANT INC, New York

31.10.2024

READING TIME 4'



Jimmy Robert, *Object/My affection*, 2007-24, (Performed by Raymond Pinto), Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and Jimmy Robert *"flipping through pages keeping a record of time"* at PARTICIPANT INC, New York, 2024. Photo: Itziar Barrio

This show was selected as part of New York Oomph—a curated roundup of the best contemporary art exhibitions and events held by galleries, museums, and institutions in town during ADAA: The Art Show, New York, October 2024.

“flipping through pages keeping a record of time” proposes an intergenerational dialogue between Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and Jimmy Robert. Sharing a prolific engagement with performance, Super 8 film, and text, this assembly of their work in all three mediums takes the limit of the page as both material and a contested site of meaning.

The exhibition title is a quote from the first line of Cha’s *Untitled (le 22 juillet)* (1976). Composed on unlined office stock, each of the thirty-three handwritten passages repeats once, producing corresponding couplets before she proceeds to the next. As with the four other text works by the late artist presented here, Cha is moving through multifarious formal approaches that push against the legibility of language and multiply difference. Likewise, Robert takes paper as readymade in both drawing and sculpture that undoes their authority as document, subverting the standardization and stability of the material. For *Western Manipulations* (2008/2024) Robert revisits an extant written work, abrading the inscription of language and redacting the final words completely through a layer of tape.

On June 28, 1976 Cha composed another untitled text in Amsterdam. At the top of the second page she writes:

*one folding in another folding in one in another folding
fusion . . . dispersion*

The fold manifests itself throughout Robert’s practice via an attention to the objecthood of paper as with *Western Manipulations*. For Cha, the fold is present in her texts including *Untitled (le 22 juillet)* where language is enmeshed through formal strategies of visual poetry.

Time is folded through the weekly presentations of Robert’s performance *Object/My affection* (2007–24). Originally staged by the artist himself in a solo presentation at Art Basel Statements in 2007, and then again in a group exhibition at West London Projects the following year, this version will be performed by multidisciplinary artist Raymond Pinto. *Object/My affection* takes place in a custombuilt structure where the performer interacts with two parallel walls. His movements are informed by the gestures in a Super 8 film by Robert (blown up to 16mm) at the same time as his body also intersects with the beam of the projector. As in Cha’s performances *Reveille Dans La Brume* (1977) and *Other Things Seen, Other Things Heard* (1978), the solo performer’s body is a tactile and temporary surface for image making.

In addition, the fold is also a means to understand the negotiation of multiple languages by both artists. Together they share the strategy of writing English and French simultaneously, the interplay between these two languages building upon Cha's first language of Korean and Robert's mother tongue of Creole.

Chronicled and memorialized by Cathy Park Hong in her essay *Portrait of an Artist*, the violent death of Cha at thirty-one years old imposes a retrospective view on her practice. This presentation seeks to adopt a parallel historical view on the work of Robert through a focus on his studio output prior to 2010. That was the year we met in Amsterdam, and the majority of Cha's works assembled in this exhibition were produced both there and in Paris during 1976. Their shared time in these cities are further points of contact between the two artists.

"flipping through pages keeping a record of time" asserts the accumulation inherent in reading and writing. Both acts produce a concatenation of time, but also people. Writing is a proposition of propinquity with others in the future, reading is a proposition of propinquity with others from the past. Or as Cha writes in her text from which the title of this exhibition is taken:

someone else beside you
someone else beside me

—Jacob Korczynski, August 30, 2024

Curated by
Jacob Korczynski

at PARTICIPANT INC, New York
until November 3, 2024