



ART PRACTICAL

The Long Distance Call by Christy Chan

by Dorothy Santos

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Humor in the mundane has a way of bringing levity to certain thorny and complicated issues in American history. Race can be a difficult topic to broach, but for comedians and performance artists alike, race and power structures can offer a multitude of possibilities and rich material. Upon hearing of Christy Chan's performance, *The Long Distance Call* (2015)—a re-enactment and live performance inspired by actual conversations with Miss Anne, a Ku Klux Klan seamstress from Alabama—I was intrigued and my imagination instantly activated.

As part of Southern Exposure's January Sets, Chan was one of three artists in residence to use the gallery space to showcase video installations and hold a live performance. Her previous work *Letter to the KKK* (2012) was based on childhood memories of the artist communicating with the KKK, which served as a point of departure for these works to come to fruition. Chan masterfully recounts the story of growing up in rural Virginia in a highly conservative, Christian environment dominated by the infamous group. As the only English-speaking person in her household, and encouraged by her mother to respond to the letters, Chan mediated communications with the KKK. This correspondence continues to serve as a basis for her ruminations on race, power, and what it means to be an American. With *The Long Distance Call*, Chan reverses power dynamics in an unimaginable and absurd light as she positions herself among the clientele of a group that would otherwise not serve her and, historically, harassed and oppressed her family.

Prior to the performance, the gallery buzzed with activity. Additional chairs were ushered into the space to accommodate the high turnout as the start time drew near. The staging was reminiscent of the split-screen trope of phone calls depicted on television shows. The spotlights illuminated the minimalist props, which included two plain white desks separated by a white wall. As the artist walked over to one desk, Miss Anne, played by Catherine Lerza, sat on the opposite side. A speaker system amplified the conversation that ensued.



Christy Chan. Installation view of *Who's Coming to Save You?*, 2015; Courtesy of the Artist and Southern Exposure, San Francisco.

Chan and Miss Anne reenacted conversations that took place over a few months; the singularity of the performance's title—*Long Distance Call*—points to the collapse of time. Chan's order for a ceremonial KKK robe (worn by Chan's actor in her video work *Who's Coming to Save You*) is the object around which these conversations take place. While a mock robe could have been created based on popular culture media depictions, the act of ordering a garment fraught with a heinous and controversial history complicates the symbolism of the robe itself. For the two women, the conversations became a meditation on their fundamental connection and understanding through a specific transaction, despite the disparity of culture, ethnicity, space, and time.

Toward the middle of the performance, we are introduced to another woman named Sue. She serves as a mediator, while Miss Anne attends to a family emergency. She provides customer service and answers Chan's inquiries regarding completion of the robe. When the delivery of the robe is delayed after a couple of months, Sue reassures Chan of its safe arrival. However, it never made it to California (Sue warned the artist about possible confiscation from external parties due to some people not understanding the cause). When Miss Anne returns to her business after her brother's passing, she makes another robe and sends it to Chan, who is eager to receive it.

Toward the end of the correspondence, Miss Anne extended a dinner invitation to the artist, if she were ever to find herself in Alabama. This resulted in a slight twist and a moment of awkwardness. The reenactment of these conversations allows the viewer to see two women that will probably never see and meet each other. The nature of Miss Anne's business and a multitude of factors would prevent the two women from actually becoming friends, let alone acquaintances outside of their own imaginations. The dinner invitation was a summation and assumption on Miss Anne's part that Chan was a white American.



Christy Chan. *The Long Distance Call*, 2015; Live performance at Southern Exposure featuring Christy Chan (left), and actresses Catherine Lerza (right) and Gail Jones (not pictured); Courtesy of the Artist and Southern Exposure, San Francisco.

The conversation produced more moments of awkward realization, however. It pointed to the availability of custom robes in children's sizes, alluding to the group's abhorrent nature and their investment in child recruitment. The idea that children are recruited into the ideology and the existence of a vestment that symbolizes such a hateful system that permeates young, innocent, and impressionable minds was appalling. It was also revealed that a faction of the Klan emerged in California—a geographic region that many mistakenly believe to be beyond the group's reach—during lapses in communication between the two women. Of all places, I found this particular revelation jarring.

Long Distance Call reminds the viewer that white supremacy and patriarchy are deeply rooted in American history. Yet Chan's work, keen storytelling, and subtle humor helps us fragment and crystallize the ways we can interrogate and examine race. Through seemingly vapid conversation, the object at the center of the dialogue symbolizes the underbelly of American society and culture and environments where people are either welcomed or ostracized and demonized. Chan weaves her audience through seemingly mundane conversations and a little bit of banter in *The Long Distance Call*. Viewers are forced to scrutinize language and communication through strange and sometimes uncomfortable moments. The history of hate and racially motivated crimes against people of color in the United States has long induced systemic cultural amnesia, but Chan ventured slyly into the parts of the American (un)consciousness to explore an undeniable part of history that quietly exists.

The Long Distance Call is on view at Southern Exposure, in San Francisco, through January 7, 2015.