

Lying with Sickness: (1) Chen Chieh-Jen's Moments of Śūnyatā

Therefore, space is neither an entity, nor the absence of an entity.

—*Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way, Chapter 5*

Chen Chieh-Jen, just like any other remarkable artist, is difficult to discuss by relying only on a single topic or category. Most commentaries on his work have extended two threads. The first is aesthetic analysis of his images, and the second is how people on a global scale become ghosts wandering in history. The former thread has already investigated his conversion of historical images, rendering them either black and white or with desaturated colors; moving-image appropriation; focus on the actions of factory laborers as they are working; and use of montages that are crystallizations of certain subject matter, slow dolly trucking shots, cross-cutting editing techniques, portraiture, and metaphorical scenes. The latter involves his focus on colonial history, the Cold War, white terror, workers in the global economy, labor struggles, the spirit of leftist politics, dispatch workers, and the preservation of life.

A more important line of inquiry lies in the growing awareness of Chen's view that art making is spiritual creation. In his two works *Revolt in the Soul and Body* and *Lingchi—Echoes of a Historical Photograph* the colonizer and colonized look at one another and interpret what they see differently. In his three works *Factory*, *Bade*, and *On Going*, social and political events are reenacted by factory workers. In *The Route*, *Military Court and Prison*, and *Empire's Border I and II*, he clearly places blame for political and economic oppression on the power structure and history of globalization. An extremely important turning point in his work appeared in *Happiness Building*, *Realm of Reverberations*, and *The Bianwen Book*, where the artist returned to his life history through his relationship with his mother, and discussed intersections between individual life history, societal control, and urban development through the Losheng Preservation Movement. The implications of the transition lie in Chen's new method of drawing content for his work from life and using it to oppose different kinds of colonial domination. In later works such as *Notes on the Twelve Karmas*, *Star Chart*, and *A Field of Non-Field*, his life histories and methods tend toward preservation and resolution. In these works, transformations, specifically those continually brought by the sense of corporeality and folk knowledge embodied in the colonized, and scenes of destiny in the course of globalization, which Chen presents with images of protests, funeral rites, and the universe, clearly manifest the life methods that the artist has derived from memories of his mother and ruminations on Buddhism. Here, sickness becomes a life force and life becomes an endless process of realizing, integrating, and resolving multiple forms of colonial domination, including internalized colonization and para-coloniality, that act upon the body.

Corporeal Awareness and Traumatized Bodies

The body eventually wears out through the five realms of existence, and life passes as quickly as the flow of water, as there is no such thing as permanence.

—*Buddha Speaks the Rotary Five Sins and Blessing of Retribution Sutra*

Chen has been driven by a mysterious sense of corporeality since at least the age of seventeen, when he collected stones from along the Xindian River and then rinsed and cataloged them. He had a vague plan to build something like a prison once he had enough stones. From this time to 1983, when he finished his military service and made *Dysfunction No. 3*, and then to 1988, when he was on verge of his decision to stop making art, confinement of his body was a visual motif in his various projects. But where exactly was he imprisoned, confined, or detained? According to Chen, these projects were not inspired by one situation, but by many. Confinement arose from the overall suffocating atmosphere extending from being a frustrated student, from living in a society under martial law, from the caste system of Taiwan's military dependents' villages and the Wild Lily Movement, and from the prohibitions placed by certain institutions such as public museums or a foreign cultural center. Questioning everything, Chen sank into a state of profound confusion at the end of martial law, and it was not until he awoke from this fever dream that he threw himself into art making again. He used image editing software to manipulate a series of historical photographs, in which we see individuals, some the actual victims and others portrayed by the artist, bearing spellbound expressions and situated in scenes of historical violence, such as *lingchi*, or the torture and massacre during the Japanese occupation. Some of his images even abound with individuals with abnormal growths, two heads, and extra or missing limbs, or who appear to be insane. He suggests their vacant expressions and deranged smiles are forms of resistance against the authoritarian or colonial gaze of the photographer, who remains unseen but is likely a soldier tasked with documenting a foreign invasion or a colonist carrying out an anthropological survey. With this return to art making, Chen started dealing with issues of visual authority and domination, and this trance-like state became a non-oppositional counterattack directed at the colonizer by the colonized, or at the torturer by the tortured, thus forming a gesture of suspended ideology and historical hostility in his work. In *Factory* (2003), *Bade Area* (2005), and *On Going* (2006), Chen focused on existential relationships between workers' bodies and the relative destruction or prosperity created by capital markets. In the first of the three works, this was a footnote to the story of women workers abandoned by a factory when it closed, whose bodies were consumed and branded by the trauma of labor and protest, and who returned to what were once daily perceptions by reenacting the past in Chen's work. All three films echo the depressing and difficult history of leftist organizations in Taiwan by using huge factory spaces as their main settings, and by presenting labor, protests, stagnation, and consumed bodies as the remnants of international capitalism, national economic policies, and social class. In these ways, Chen strove to strengthen the afterlife of these workers' experiences by creating portraits of their consumed bodies at the ruins of abandoned factories.

With *Military Court and Prison* (2007 – 2008), *People Pushing* (2007 – 2008), *Empire's Borders I* (2008 – 2009), *Empire's Borders II — Western Enterprises, Inc.* (2010), Chen shifted his focus from social movements and their afterlives to the problems of archives. The complete prohibition in nationally managed archives of the confined bodies, bodies in trance-like states, and consumed bodies discussed in his previous works became the topic of his further explorations. According to Chen, they are spirits trapped in history and the global political economy because they are unable to extricate themselves from the historical time and authority of official archives. Furthermore, they are not only

stuck in these gaps in history due to unfavorable circumstances and the results of administrative methods, but also because of circumstances in their everyday lives. Therefore, Chen applied his energy to art practices and reflections that concern states of life, specifically those transcending the length of an individual life and those inseparable from circumstances sustaining life, thus presenting confined bodies, bodies in trance-like states, consumed bodies, and even ghosts as bodies traumatized by historical events, and emphasizing that these traumatized bodies are repeatedly manufactured, destroyed, sacrificed, and abandoned under different historical situations, regional cultures, geopolitics, and political systems.

The Śūnyatā Realized through Sickness: From Sick Body to Imminent Body

The result of outflow does not reflect the nature of its origin, it is the origin that flows out to manifest itself. [...] The outflow suggests a production of the same kind; just as a fruit outflows from a seed, the result outflows from its origin.

—*Treatise on the Establishment of the Doctrine of Consciousness-Only, Volume II*

When Chen was working on *Happiness Building* (2012), *The Bianwen Book I* (2002 – 2014), *Realm of Reverberations Series* (2014 – 2017), and *A Field of Non-Field* (2017), his mother, brother, and friends he met through his long-term interest in the Losheng Preservation Movement all went through periods of illness, thus becoming important reference points for narratives in these artworks. This led to the direct participation of temporary communities in the production of Chen's work, and the presentation of such communities in the works themselves. These communities often participated in the construction of sets in factory spaces or structures in the films, which satisfied the artist's desire to present meta-structures of coloniality. And then woven into these meta-narratives of colonialism are the artist's core interests: the unrelenting promotion of domination and exploitation over several centuries of recent history, and the cruel mechanisms of elimination and belittling of values. How are the nameless, the dispossessed, and the weak to answer this? While it is undeniable that being cognizant is essential for the dispossessed, in today's complex and pervasive meta-human global structure, knowledge has become useless in stemming the domination of the individual. Therefore, it is important for art to employ sensations to stimulate perceptions through the body. In other words, the consciousness-only art that Chen creates is precisely for this kind of sensation—to comprehend, create comprehension, and stimulate comprehension. To perceive is to have awareness, and even to create a foundation or impetus for alternative knowledge. This transition from simply being aware of sensations to having alternative knowledge is a kind of qualitative change or *śūnyatā*, thus transcending the dialectic of having and not-having.

The qualitative change discussed here is different from other forms of change because it emphasizes an intrinsic quality and is absolute. The Buddhist term *śūnyatā*, meaning intrinsic emptiness, is a field created by the absolute change of an intrinsic quality. Therefore, emptiness could be used in art to effect qualitative change, as well as the result of qualitative change. The *śūnyatā* on which Chen has

focused represents and motivates qualitative change. However, what is the absolute change with which Chen is concerned with respect to the nameless, dispossessed, and weak? Qualitative change is a certain kind of effect that Chen expects art to produce in society. His qualitative changes are related to Gilles Deleuze's concept of *devenir* and Jacques Rancière's *aisthesis* (affect theory) or *métamorphosis*. These have been united by Chen under the Buddhist concept of self transformation to generate extremely complex content. In Deleuze's writings, *devenir* (becoming) does not specifically refer to the body or regard the body as a key difference producing extremely complex content. *Devenir* actually has nothing to do with the body, but indicates continuous change in the relationships among things. Chen, by using the Buddhist concepts, touched on a core principle that is identical to what Deleuze was thinking of with *devenir*, and that is equality—a kind of equality that appears due to radical change. Therefore, Chen regards unemployed workers, dispatch workers, foreign spouses, and social activists as *Others*, while Deleuze proposed that all becoming is either “becoming-minor” or “becoming-woman.” Rancière claims *aisthesis* concerns qualitative change of perceptions, which he calls *métamorphosis* and almost completely echoes Chen's early definition of artistic power. But like Deleuze, Rancière does not directly specify the body, or in other words, in the network of *partage du sensible*, he does not discuss specifically how the body acts as a carrier. Therefore, the body is the key difference in how Chen's artwork approaches Deleuze's *devenir* and Rancière's *aisthesis*. The body in Chen's artwork manifests multiple states of being colonized, or para-coloniality, and may produce a qualitatively changed body, or transformed self.

Judging from the sickness of these *Others* or transformed selves, that is, bodies that have suffered punishment, work-related injury, and trauma, their sickness is bearing the inscription of “contradictory body” following confrontations, struggles, and effects caused by differences in logic, struggles, and effects, and their sickness has been formed under the effects of coloniality. According to Chen, absolute change and *śūnyatā* might provide a way of rescuing oneself from the effects of oppressors (such as occupiers) and their agents (such as intellectuals), so that they can extend the meanings of their lives. Therefore, it can be said that Chen puts himself in the place of or even identifies with the *Other*, so that in the development of his work, self-help is his method and effect, and his art is naturally the cause, as it initiates its own production. How does art, based on its peculiarities and various experimental gains, motivate movements again and again, so that the artist himself and the *Other* become potential operators of imminent bodies? The imminent body is the body of this moment because of what it has accumulated in the past, and overlaps, as well as splits, with what it is about to be.

The qualitative change from sick body to the imminent body is similar to what was said when Mañjuśrī and Vimalakīrti met. Vimalakīrti first took his own body lying with sickness as an example, and in a dialogue with Mañjuśrī, promoted a certain kind of imminent body and named it the “sickness Bodhisattva.” Vimalakīrti interpreted the sick body as a link in an ecological cycle, and based on this redefined the role of the Bodhisattva. These scenes and dialogues created by Vimalakīrti are very much like Chen's artworks, which drive the process of change from a sick body to an imminent body, which is a process of outflowing. That is, this imminence comes from the past and penetrates the present to become the future, but this present escapes the dichotomic framework of the past and the future, and produces a state called *śūnyatā*. Rescuing as effect, and art as cause become interactive and emotional kinetic energy in *śūnyatā*. This energy of self preservation inspired by *śūnyatā* is evidenced in the works that Chen has created for more than twenty years.

Consciousness-Only Art in the Post-Internet Age

Chen first conceived his *Notes on the Twelve Karmas* between 1999 and 2000, and in 2018 exhibited the work along with *Star Chart* and *A Field of Non-Field* in *Trans-Justice: Para-Colonial@Technology*, thus presenting more than twelve years of his thoughts and imagination regarding relationships between humanity and technology. *Notes on the Twelve Karmas* starts with two blind people who are sharing their notions of what the future world will be and then entering a tunnel that is under complete surveillance. The work questions those things that are invisible and inaudible in the digital Internet age. Next, a post-human scene unfolds in which many naked bodies that are implanted with different electronic digital devices stand still in front of a surveillance device. In the lower left of this device's screen we see a digital timer turn to the year 2000, which is twenty years before the time of the exhibition. With this work, Chen suggests that digital technology and the development of digital industries has alienated people, raises questions about how we are to accept a non-human future created by this seductive emerging industry, and points out that digital industries and technologies cannot solve issues of class and exploitation. *Star Chart* is based on experiences related to the global economy that Chen's brother had close to twenty years ago. The work presents an individual impacted and abandoned by global economic development, and suggests how an individual can use a cosmic theory composed of alternative, non-academic, and self formed knowledge as a means of protection. This means of self preservation is a cosmic technique based on a different understanding of the universe, and develops technologies of the self and care of the self. The ways in which Chen's brother rescued and protected himself, and treated his own sickness inspired the artist to conceive of this karmic method.

A Field of Non-Field extends this idea of self preservation and presents a huge shift in the artist's thinking. Chen filmed a group of laborers, protesters, and people considered unknown or unskilled taking part in a performance of a funeral procession with thematic music. The convergence of so many of Chen's friends and past collaborators, and traumatized bodies in a ritual where they were circulating in a way that suggests reincarnation produced transformed bodies. However, the entire funeral procession travels to the threshold of the known world. Women workers in the rain shout, "Nameless, what can we do?" The participants discussed and contributed such simple sentences to incisively express their plight as dominated and colonized people. In the work, we also see a group of women who are singing and seem to be performing *lo-deh sao* theater. Then the camera cuts away to an actor in the distance portraying a wounded version of the artist's brother and who had been at the front of the funeral procession. He looks back at the women in a way that suggests rebirth or perhaps death, thus creating an expectation of the threshold between worlds. This is Chen's moment of *śūnyatā*.

If *śūnyatā* for the purpose of self preservation has become the core of Chen's thinking, then we can clearly see that his interpretation of *śūnyatā* with regards to colonized and unknown people, and the absolute nothingness of the Kyoto school of philosophy, founded by Japanese philosopher Kitarō Nishida (1870 – 1945), present a strong argument for a type of Asian thought with completely different views and ideas. Chen's qualitative transformation is a kind of preservation, while the absolute nothingness of the Kyoto school is closer to transcendence. The former is a way to fight against capitalism and market logic, and ultimately leads to dis-paracolonization, which is a way of resolving contradictions inscribed on the self. However, absolute nothingness in the context of its time, led to hegemony. The former is exhausted by confrontation, and the relationship between colonizer and

colonized is shattered. The latter, in confrontation, formed the state's direct control over its people, and also formed a state of maximum possession.

Chen's *śūnyatā* project is a deep reflection on the lives of protesters and unknown people in a globalized world. The products of transnational corporations and the financial groups that back them have formed a new digital caste system by concentrating assets and exacerbating the wealth gap. With his life experience and artwork, Chen leads us back to the times of the Buddha Shakyamuni and the problems he faced in Hindu society. While our technological environment is completely different from Shakyamuni's, the information age and the information explosion it brought has caused a human crisis, and Chen believes this is comparable to the many contending schools of thought that flourished in ancient India. Therefore, we face problems not only caused by technology, but also by social crises. From Chen's early work *Lingchi—Echoes of a Historical Photograph*, in which he mounted a revision of Georges Bataille's post-colonial interpretation of *lingchi*, to his *A Field of Non-Field*, in which he reconsidered dis-paracolonization in human society and the individual's plight based on *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way* and *Discourse on the Perfection of Consciousness-Only*, it can be said that Chen's art career spanning the period from the 1990s to the present is a kind of consciousness-only art derived from alternative ideological resources and the Asian context. This is not closely related to his profession, but rather a consciousness-only art closely bound to his life.

Footnote

“Lying with sickness” refers to a story in which Vimalakīrti was sick and aware that Mañjuśrī Bodhisattva would be leading many Bodhisattvas and disciples to visit him. Before their arrival, he cleared out his residence, and lay down on his bed to develop a discussion about sickness based on his experiences with sickness.