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TRANSLATING THE VISUAL: CHEN CHIEH-JEN'S WORK

Born in Taiwan and currently living in Taipei, Chen Chieh-jen (1960) is a video-artist whose *oeuvre* presents a profound and fierce – although often silent – historical and political meditation.¹ His works are often characterized by the insertion of archival footage in close dialogue with actual and contemporary images. Looking at China's past in relation to its present, Chen underlines social damages, frustrated expectations, misinterpretations and appropriations by the Western gaze.² In his

¹ This essay considers two videos dating back to 2002 and 2003, before and since then Chen Chieh-jen has realized many other works using different mediums including also painting, performance and installation.

² "Three victims of *lingchi* have been photographed by different French soldiers over the course of history. These photographs had once testified to the savage barbarity of China and served as exotic novelties, circulating around Europe in the form of post cards. French writer and thinker Georges Bataille, in his 1961 book *The Tears of Eros*, discusses *lingchi* from a philosophical perspective, specifically in relation to the notions of ecstasy and limit experience. Bataille's interpretations of these images have been the ones most often cited in the West, and in this way, *lingchi* became widely known among

works it is often the act of vision in itself to be exposed and questioned, referring to photography and issues of perception, image-making processes, and the routes of pictures in cultural, literary, visual and transcultural translations. In a wider perspective, Chen – who refers to the “irreducible multiplicity of reality” –³ questions history, its routes, meanings and legacies, landing in a fragmented and uncomfortable dimension. In his *oeuvre*, pictures form a flow with the capacity to traverse histories, and even to connect the kingdom of historiographical narratives to the human body.

Considering the most effective features of Chen’s subversive visual approach, this essay addresses a video made in 2002, *Lingchi – Echoes of a Historical Photograph*,⁴ whose layered visual dimension asks for a complex and plural analysis. This black and white video reenacts the so-called *lingchi* [凌遲] – literally: ‘lingering death’, also known as ‘death by a thousand cuts’ –, an execution consisting in a slow dismemberment

western intellectuals”. Chen, Chieh-jen. *Lingchi – Echoes of a Historical Photograph: Introduction and Artist’s Statement*. Retrieved from:

<https://itpark.com.tw/artist/essays_data/10/842/73/en> [Accessed 2019, June 17th]. Jérôme Bourgon explains: “In China, capital executions were not organized as a show nor subject to aesthetic representations, and they had no redemptive function. This matter-of-fact way of executing people caused Westerners deep uneasiness. The absence of religious background and staging devices was interpreted as a sign of barbarity and cruelty. What was stigmatised was not so much the facts that their failure to conform to the ‘*supplice* pattern’ that constituted for any Westerner the due process of capital executions. At the turn of the twentieth century, Westerners started to see Chinese punishments not as legal penalties but as deliberate and sophisticated display of the utmost suffering”. Bourgon, Jérôme (2003). Chinese Executions: Visualising their Differences with European Supplices. *European Journal of East Asian Studies*, 2, 1, 153-154.

³ Chen, Chieh-jen. Making Reverberation: Residue of Sounds and Images. In: Peng Hsiao-yen and Ella Raidel (eds.) (2018). *The Politics of Memory in Sinophone Cinemas and Image Culture: Altering Archive*. New York: Routledge, 107.

⁴ Originally conceived as a 22 mins 34 secs video installation on three large screens for the Taipei Biennial in 2002. About Chen’s *oeuvre* see the acute observations by Michel, Régis (2007). *L’œil-écran ou la nouvelle image. 100 vidéos pour repenser le monde*. Luxembourg: Casino Luxembourg - Forum d’Art Contemporain, 304-323.

performed with knives, which was abolished in 1905.⁵ Chen's attention is focused on the preparatory phase, the ceremony accompanying the execution, the audiences' expressions and most of all, on the victim's face, at once lost and ecstatic. The killing is only alluded to until we are confronted with a historical picture taken by a French soldier in 1904-05 showing a man killed through *lingchi* which inspired the artist, and before him Georges Bataille, who writes about it in his *Les Larmes d'Éros* (The Tears of Eros) published in 1961.

Although the inspiration of Chen's art stems from a historical and political critique – suggesting that Chinese history has lived its own *lingchi*, being dissected, fragmented and altered as a tortured body – the aim of this study is to explore the artist's visual and aural praxis. In Chen's work in fact, vision and its limits, in both a concrete and metaphorical sense, play a major part in the construction of a dense artistic and conceptual discourse. By playing on perceptive horizons, Chen shapes a meta-temporal poetics on time, memory, history, historiographical transmission and on our ambiguous relation to history with regards to the past, and to the acquisition of knowledge. His subversive representation and translation of history is built through key concepts and key figures such as visibility and invisibility, silence and sound, gestures, slowness, and spatial and temporal suspension.

⁵ Chen underlines that: “[...] before 1905, *lingchi* was a form of punishment used by China's feudalistic system of government for criminals who had committed the most heinous of crimes. To carry out *lingchi*, the victim would be slowly and repeatedly cut until they died. The practice of *lingchi* was stopped in 1905, and today this word is used in Chinese vernacular speech to describe any endless, repetitive or inhumane work, or tortuous situation”. Chen, *Lingchi – Echoes of a Historical Photograph: Introduction and Artist's Statement*. For a historical frame of the punishment of *lingchi* in relation to Chen's work, see: Berry, Michael (2011). *A History of Pain. Trauma in Modern Chinese Literature and Film*. New York: Columbia University Press, 32-49.

Lingchi's whole performance is structured on visual dynamics, giving a major role to gazes and faces' expressiveness, or inexpressiveness. Faces occupy most of the screen and this is particularly true for the victim. The viewer is obliged to consider them closely, also because of the extreme slowness of the camera movements.⁶ However, at the same time the spectator remains locked out, unable to detect people's feelings or thoughts, especially of the tortured man, whose expression fluctuate between ecstasy and unconsciousness. His expression is in fact at the origin of Chen's interest in the recalled historical picture, sharing this fascination with Bataille.⁷ Even if interpreted in different ways, both see a disquieting smile in the killed man. Chen declares: "The victim of *lingchi* in this photograph is gazing at the horizon and weakly smiling – a puzzling smile which is like a powerful vortex. Everyone, including those who can't bear to look at the image due to its brutality, Westerners who draw connections between the victim and Christian imagery, Georges Bataille who explains the photograph in relation to erotic ecstasy, and the many academics and artists who have examined and responded to *lingchi*, they all, including myself as I repeatedly stare at this image, are drawn into the puzzling vortex of his smile".⁸

⁶ Amy Huei-hwa Cheng notes that: "Through the method of 'extension' (the slow motion of the film and the intercutting of scenes of different time and space), he magnifies the trance and prolongs the present". Cheng, Amy Huei-hwa. *A History of the Photographed Subject: On Lingchi – Echoes of a Historical Photograph*. Retrieved from: <https://www.itpark.com.tw/artist/critical_data/10/166/73/en> [Accessed 2019, June 17th].

⁷ For a critical analysis of Bataille's reception and interpretation of the *lingchi*, among others see: Brook, Timothy, Bourgon, Jérôme, Blue, Gregory (2008). *Death by a Thousand Cuts*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 222-242.

⁸ And further on: "This is an active smile, one which allows the image to transfer the value which lies beneath the smile onto future audiences". Chen, *Lingchi – Echoes of a Historical Photograph: Introduction and Artist's Statement*. Chen suggests that the smile "may embody the spirit of the Buddhist concept of Parināmanā, 迴向 (merit transference)". Chen, *Making Reverberation: Residue of Sounds and Images*, 105. Moreover he states: "The faint smile of the *lingchi* victim in the historical picture was a 'counteroffensive, active' smile while being given opium, while being dismembered and



[Fig. 1.] Chen Chieh-jen, *Lingchi* (still), 2002.

The cinematic treatment of the face and body of the man, as well as of the officiants, turns the body into a space to be crossed and scrutinized; spectators and us as viewers double this effect, going through and reading the face and body as a map. In this sense, the face may be considered as a desert space covered by the camera through a slow and random movement looking over a landscape to be explored. It is in fact a

while being photographed. It was not just ecstasy, but a small active smile full of defiance – a smile that looks to the future. It is a hundred-year smile captured on the photograph”. In Cheng, *A History of the Photographed Subject: On Lingchi – Echoes of a Historical Photograph*. Chen had already used this image in 1996 in *Genealogy of Self*, about which he says: “[...] I began discussing a different kind of history; one hidden within the history of photography and which I call the history of the photographed”. Chen, *Lingchi – Echoes of a Historical Photograph: Introduction and Artist's Statement*. Bourgon underlines: “The *supplice chinois* that became a common representation of China at the turn of the twentieth century is a cross-cultural chimera, a blend of Chinese information and Western representation. Chinese punitive practices were perceived, interpreted and described through a Western framework which no common notion, like ‘Christianity’, ‘modern humanitarianism’ or ‘colonial racism’ accurately accounts for”. Bourgon, *Chinese Executions: Visualising their Differences with European Supplices*, 182-183.

face that offers a limited amount of meanings, evidence of the impossibility to get inside the man's feelings, a face that indeed remains indecipherable; but which is comparable to a desert where the apparent void may be considered as a field of intensities. We are always failing in reaching a complete understanding of what we are witnessing, and the man's face becomes the expression of a space and dimension that cannot be appropriated: we may follow the lines of his face, examine and go through its contours, but nevertheless we are lost, as if we are wandering in a vast landscape. Worth mentioning here what Alberto Giacometti wrote in a letter to Pierre Matisse in 1948 speaking about the difficulty of capturing the entirety of a figure: "But if on the contrary one began by analysing a detail, the tip of the nose for instance, one was lost. One could spend one's entire life without achieving any result. The shape dissolves, it merely appears in the form of grains moving around in a deep dark void, the distance between one wing of the nose and the other is like the Sahara, it has no limits, nothing to be fixed, everything escapes".⁹ The Other – Chen seems to tell us – is unknowable as a blank, vast and open space, just like the changing and ungraspable horizons of a desert.

The issue about faces in Chen's videos may also be put into dialogue with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of *visagéité* – faciality –, which considers face as a means to express intensities, finding its best expression in cinematic close-up.¹⁰ Moreover, it is interesting here to recall Antonin Artaud's concept of 'body without organs', then re-elaborated by Deleuze and Guattari who connected it with the idea of 'desert'. According to them, body should not be considered as an

⁹ In: González, Ángel (2006). *Alberto Giacometti: Works, Writings, Interviews*. Barcelona: Ediciones Polígrafa, 132.

¹⁰ Deleuze, Gilles, Guattari, Félix (1980). *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (2017). London: Bloomsbury, 195-223.

organized system made by organs, but rather as an open field of forces, a multiplicity.¹¹ In this sense, the body in Chen's video is treated like a blank land, a space deprived of any limits or borders. A body that seems detached from any beholder, but that at the same time – as a territory – is conquered and appropriated by others.



[Fig. 2.] Chen Chieh-jen, *Lingchi* (still), 2002.

The execution is not shown in a direct way and the viewer follows it from a diverted perspective, mostly reflected in the audience's and officiant's eyes. We look at people who are in their turn looking or, better, scrutinizing. Our visual experience and our knowledge of the events are partial and mediated. Moreover, a particular sequence shows the ceremony through shadows projected on the ground: appearances deprived of any materiality and engaged precisely in a shadow game. Shadows that hint to a form of historiography participating in Chen's poetics, in which historical evidence becomes a mass of second-hand

¹¹ See: Deleuze, Gilles, Parnet, Claire (1977). *Dialogues II* (2007). New York: Columbia University Press, 90; Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 32-34.

material; a material composed by sources, documents, images, memories: all elements to be considered, through a skeptical eye, as incomplete fragments, more similar to parts of a dissected body than autonomous sources. Chen declares: “I am interested in the ‘trance’-like state and ‘fragmentation’ in the history of images because of the uncertainty of the event and the silence of the photographed subject”.¹²

The artist puts the viewer in an uncomfortable zone of discernment, thus forcing him to change perspective, leaving him with a lack of predetermined rules to look at and consider things. The spectator is left with scattered fragments to be eventually re-arranged in a readable dimension. Emblematically, a reversed vision of the sky – the world upside down – appears in the video.

Through all these visual devices Chen seems to ask what are we really looking at: an account of a historical event, a fictionalized re-enactment, or maybe just ‘the vision of a vision’: a doubled visual path that instead of leading somewhere seems to divert us from any clear or fixed direction. In an interview he states: “We cannot escape from being ‘looked at’ and ‘written about’. From being the silent other, we have become amnesiac aphasics and manipulated blind seers. As a response in the contemporary world, we must try to ‘rewrite’ and ‘re-discuss’ issues”.¹³ Similarly, the close views of the man’s face could translate an attempt of identification: Chen draws us into the man’s place; but at the same time these close views do not lead to a better or deeper understanding; they leave us floating in the man’s eyes and

¹² In: Cheng, *A History of the Photographed Subject: On Lingchi – Echoes of a Historical Photograph*.

¹³ *Ibid.*

estrangement. To closely look does not mean to see, know or comprehend.

The very act of dissecting is not shown, the spectator witnesses the preparation of the body, the display and choice of the knives, the close examination of body and skin and the 'result' of the dismembering of the man's chest. The subject and object of the execution is the body itself, not the man as an identified individual: only and meaningfully his body. Chen seems to tell that history is not something outside us or embalmed in the past, history is something we are immersed in, something inscribed in our own bodily and emotional existence. The body is here submitted to an act of appropriation and of a carefully performed destruction or erasure, which does not consider the body as a whole, but anatomized, as a fragmented entity that in Chen's vision is a reflection of history itself; it is a fragmented, ambiguous and altered horizon, to which we relate in a fragmented and ambiguous manner. Significantly, it is in fact a poetics of fragments, remnants and ruins, that pervades Chen's visual and conceptual aesthetics. In the first sequence of the video, we are inside an abandoned building, where pulviscular material slowly floats. Here – as in other videos by Chen – deserted buildings play a paramount role that goes beyond a mere architectural and spatial function in the landscape.¹⁴ They act as temporal shrines, sites of recording and where impalpable presences and memories are kept. Something has disappeared and a

¹⁴ Chen explains: "The five architectural sites that appear inside the torture victim's body in the film are, in order of appearance: Old Summer Palace of Beijing, which was destroyed by the Anglo-French Forces and the Eight-Nation Alliance; the laboratories of Japan's Unit 731, which conducted lethal human experiments; the prison on Taiwan's Green Island, which was used for political prisoners during the Cold War/martial law period; the heavily polluted factory left behind by the RCA Corporation of the United States, in Taoyuan, Taiwan; and the women's dormitory of a garment factory that was unscrupulously closed down by its owners". Chen, *Lingchi – Echoes of a Historical Photograph: Introduction and Artist's Statement*.

space or a situation is then left in a state of abandonment. The adjective 'deserted' conveys in fact the idea of a 'passage' from a condition to another and in this sense it is worth recalling that the term 'desert' has a Latin origin: 'desertum' meaning 'thing abandoned'. A memory of loss, voids and remnants, is thus already rooted, inherent in the original word. Thanks to – or because of – such a link to a previous condition, desert and deserted places become the sites of resonances, of temporal and historical echoes and returns: the passage of time leaves marks, signs, that can be perceived as in a resonating chamber.¹⁵ Even though the imaginary of the desert often coincides with the idea of a 'zero' point, a 'tabula rasa', nevertheless it is the place of a full nothingness, on the verge of welcoming constant new beginnings and re-appropriations. In this sense desertification in Chen's hands becomes a 'populated' emptiness. The image of the abandoned building in *Lingchi* is followed by strands of hair falling at someone's feet. The body seems to fall into pieces like the abandoned and crumbling building that will be shown later. In this way the physical dissection finds a reflection in the emptied places. Dust flutters in the air and on the screen, underlining once more the state of abandonment and an aesthetics which is receptive to the residual elements of reality. The process of fragmentation lived by bodies and places reflects the process of appropriation of historical events. Chen, perhaps, is telling us that our interpretation of historical facts transforms history into a mass of fragments, a ruinous body; or, that history can be appropriated only by fragments and through partial

¹⁵ It is revelatory that the representation of the angel of history that Walter Benjamin took from Paul Klee's painting, consists of a character being pushed ahead by a strong wind, with his eyes turned backwards, towards the past, where a mass of ruins – in Benjamin's reading – can be seen. Benjamin, Walter (1950). *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. In: Walter Benjamin (2007). *Illuminations. Essays and Reflections*. New York: Schocken Books, 257-258.

perspectives. One may say that here we are witnessing the falling into pieces of the body of history itself.

The act of looking, the phenomenology of the eye established by Chen in his video, is developed and problematized via photography, by the presence of a man documenting the execution with his camera.¹⁶ The introduction of such a character is consistent with the historical sources: it is through pictures taken by European travelers that the Western world was confronted with the practice of *lingchi*, and it is through a picture taken by a French soldier that Georges Bataille came across the particular picture shown in Chen's video.¹⁷ Besides the historical reference, the presence of the photographer in Chen's video alters and further subverts the nature of the spectacle we are witnessing. In fact, we are not only faced with a re-enactment of a historical event, but we are also partaking in a photographic session.¹⁸ What we are looking at is thus inscribed in a triple frame: the audience's vision, the photographer's look and the director's cut. The camera is used here both as a material object and as a metaphorical tool for recording and appropriating: a box capturing a moment in time and space and suspending it in an indefinite dimension. Extending Roland Barthes' micro-version of death related to photographic portraits described in his *La chambre claire* (Camera Lucida), the man is here living a double death: a physical one and a

¹⁶ Concerning photography's role as vehicle for cultural identity in China see: Fraser, Sarah E. (2010). The Face of China: Photography's Role in Shaping Image, 1860-1920. *Getty Research Journal*, 2, 39-52.

¹⁷ Only in 1997 *lingchi* images appeared in Chinese-language publications. See Cheng, *A History of the Photographed Subject: On Lingchi – Echoes of a Historical Photograph*.

¹⁸ Chen declares: "The moment the eyes of the victim enduring torture and the lens of the camera held by the French soldier met, the frozen image and dismembered body manifested the ruthlessness of feudalistic law and foreshadowed the advent of modernity in the non-western world. Imperialism and colonialism, in the name of modernization, brought various forms of dismembering technologies to bear on the colonized and photographed". Chen, *Lingchi – Echoes of a Historical Photograph: Introduction and Artist's Statement*.

symbolic one, passing from being a subject to becoming an object,¹⁹ both for the officiants of his execution and for the photographer. The shot of the camera triggers a further embalming process, but we could also recognize here Barthes' concept of an anterior future inherent in the photographic image: this man is dead and is going to die at the same time.²⁰ He embodies a temporal paradox: we witness death on its way, but death already happened in a past time.



[Fig. 3.] Chen Chieh-jen, *Lingchi* (still), 2002.

The principle of the camera as a sort of double gaze is underlined in Chen's video thanks to a visual and conceptual parallel established by editing devices: the image of the man's skinned chest – similar to two dark eyes – is followed by the appearance of the camera's 'eyes' and then by human eyes. Furthermore, the viewer is made to see through the holes

¹⁹ Barthes, Roland (1980). *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (2000). London: Vintage, 10-15.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 94-97.

of the man's chest, turning the body into a disquieting vantage point of vision on the outside.²¹ In this way, we are caught in the photographer's picture, too. Through this visual spiral, the photographic act is both reflected in our eyes and we ourselves reflect the photographic act. We ourselves as viewers are caught in a play of representation and documentation. It is a subtle way of making the spectators victims and accomplices at the same time. It is in fact not just about witnessing, it is participating in the execution and in the act of appropriation: we are not external viewers, we are responsible too. In this way history – as Chen seems suggesting – is not something done in the past and by others; history is a permanent process with constant *echoes* in the present. From such a perspective, it is not by accident that the audience watching – and symbolically living their own *lingchi* – has a contemporary outfit: past and present are intermingled through a meta-temporal bond and thus the crowd seems to live its own *lingchi* in 'our' present times.²² The idea of a time that is not a linear positivist progression, but rather an eternal return and an open threshold where past and present influence each other, may find a further confirmation in the recurrent presence of round forms in Chen's video. Holes, buildings' apertures and windows, camera

²¹ Chen affirms: "The two large black wounds on the chest of the victim in the photograph seem like passageways connecting the past and future, and gazing at them we pass through the photograph's two dimensional surface and into the body of the victim. Entering these bodily passageways, we can see what happened in this instance of *lingchi* before and after the photograph was taken. From the destruction of the Old Summer Palace by Anglo-French Forces and the Eight-Nation Alliance, lethal human experimentation carried out by the Japanese Army's Unit 731 in Harbin, the jailing of political prisoners during the Cold War period in Taiwan, the dumping of toxic pollutants in Taiwan by transnational industries, and to the exploitation of low wage laborers, it seems that the barbarity of *lingchi* has never really ended". Chen, *Lingchi – Echoes of a Historical Photograph: Introduction and Artist's Statement*.

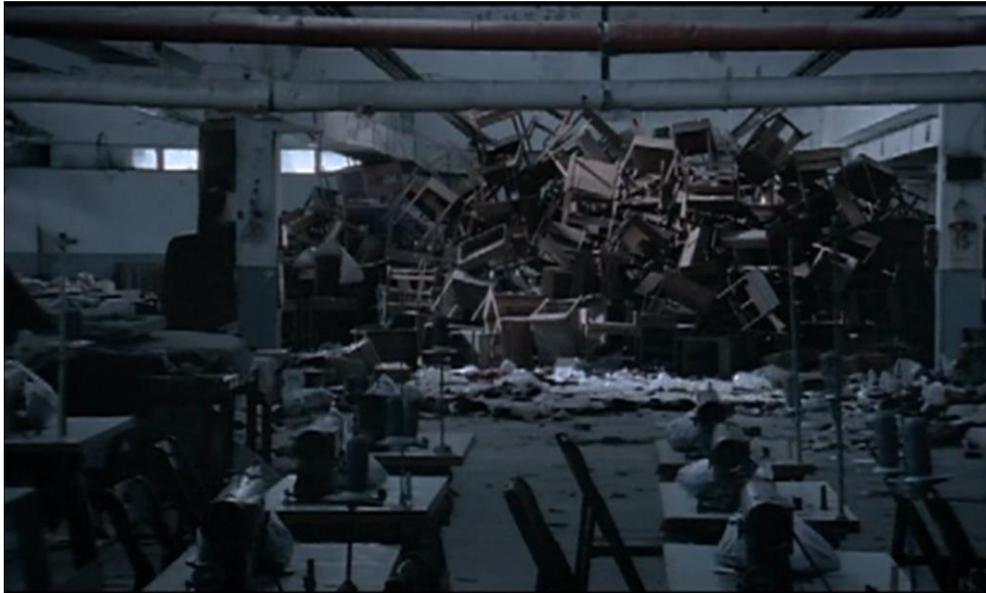
²² Chen underlines that: "[...] props, costumes and hairstyles used in this video are [...] from different eras and the torture implements used for *lingchi* are not historically accurate. Furthermore, the performers were unemployed laborers, students and actors from small theater groups". *Ibid.*

lens, and finally, the circles on the man's chest, become redundant occurrences which double the state of trance and unconsciousness of the tortured man, driving the spectator in a similar mesmerizing state.

Visuality, which is central in Chen's works, is accompanied by another sensorial dimension. Most of Chen's videos are silent or skillfully crossed by tiny sounds. Depriving something of its sound is like giving a different – or even louder – sound to everything. One starts paying attention to things from a different point of view. And the change of perspective for considering facts and events, is essential in Chen's reading of history. The staged *lingchi's* ceremony is carried out in the deepest silence: no word is spoken or heard, no sound accompanies the ritual, and it is a ritual also because of the silence surrounding it. Yet, the surface of these mute images is crossed by light and imperceptible sounds: recordings of the electromagnetic waves emitted by Chen's own skin. His own body is in this way physically inserted in the work. The silence of images is also echoed in the silence of movements: everything in Chen's video – here and in other projects – is performed in the slowest manner. Each gesture and movement is taken from his common rhythm and acquires a further weight, like fossilized instants of an out of time dimension. Chen's videos can be read in terms of a desert of sounds, and desert itself can be interpreted as the place of the pre-verbal aural dimension, a suspended time creating a time of its own. The ritualistic dimension of the ceremony, replicated by the video's temporal treatment, is emblematic of the temporal discourse developed in Chen's art. Primarily, in Chen's video the ritual involves the treatment of the man's body. He is undressed, his body is examined, his skin is spread with a special ointment, his arms are tied with a rope, a sense-dulling beverage is prepared. The ritual perpetrated on the body doubles the *lingchi's* ceremony, in itself a ritual. The spectator follows the officiant's

operations, which are meant to get inside the man's body, opening it and digging into his skin. The disquieting and at the same time fascinating paradox is that the care and the attention clash with the violence of the act and its scope, but finally they are the essential part of the violation. The execution opens also the way for a meditation on the relationship between the self and its physical presence: while the man's body is looked at, touched and violated, his mind is estranged and seems to have left his mortal shell. A dimension which is poetically underlined by the rain starting to fall on him and on the people gathered around.

Similar operations are present in other works, such as *Factory* (2003). Here, Chen gathers a group of old women in the clothing factory where they once worked, and he stages their daily work. When Chen realized the video, the manufacturer had been closed for seven years, workers lost their job because of bankruptcy and the place is thus deserted, but also full of objects to be auctioned. At the beginning of the video we are confronted with a 'desert' which has gone through a process of abandonment and emptying, both in terms of disappearance of human presences and in terms of an activity no longer perpetuated. However, it is also a desert full of industrial furniture, and it is exactly through such a 'fullness' that the desert makes itself perceptible. It is a choking emptiness where the weight of objects is immediately felt as something that must be related to a wider and deeper horizon of meaning.



[Fig. 4.] Chen Chieh-jen, *Factory* (still), 2003.

Chen's artistic operation consists in filming the group of women while they re-enact their working dynamics. The artist's critique works on many level, one hinting for instance to globalization and its effects on local markets; the video stigmatizes social damages, workers' conditions and the lack of recognition in their society. Contemporary images are intermingled with archival materials putting past and present, once more, in a close contact and contrast: the documentary footage shows in fact propaganda images of a 'florid' Chinese past.



[Fig. 5.] Chen Chieh-jen, *Factory* (still), 2003.

The appearance of figures in this 'desert' signifies the encounter and the collision between individual history and History with a big 'H'. The weight of this 'encounter' seems underlined by a long sequence lingering on a woman unable to insert the thread in the needle of her sewing-machine. This long passage is a homage and symbol for the historical and social injustices and oblivions lived by workers in China.

The industrial furniture appears as 'staged' – a *mise en scène* – and such theatrical dimension turns us into spectators and witnesses of a scene being displayed in front of us and for us. The recent historical legacy is here visually reduced into a mass of useless and even insurmountable objects. Remnants and ruins in a deserted landscape which could stand for human history. Obviously, Chen does not have a positivist view on history, rather he follows – and re-enacts – a logic of circular time where past, present and future are always connected and influence each other in an irreducible dialogue. In his works Chen creates cracks in time by suspending its usual pace and in so doing he questions and subverts the

very meaning of chronological flux, progression and history making. He puts us in front of temporal thresholds asking us to linger as much as possible on the *route* – as the title of one of his video – instead of hurrying towards a response.²³ Chen slowly crosses the space with his camera, making us feel the weight of a distance to cover and creating a disorienting effect where limits of the room lay undefined and ‘open’. This room is not only a real space, it is also a metaphor of history itself, of the desert produced in its course, with new forms of nomadism and states of bewilderment catching on and asking for new kinds of orientation and survival.

In the final sequence of the video, Chen stages something close to an act of recovery which is also a demonstration of resistance and resilience. Some of the women start cleaning chairs and tables, washing them from the dust. It is a symbolic act where a possible salvation from the historical and social desert we ourselves produce, consists in taking care of remnants and saving them from oblivion. The dusty desert of the factory is washed in a common un-lyrical gesture of daily commitment. Remembrance becomes a healing act of civil responsibility, but in Chen’s work such a ‘cure’ is a constant process that does not necessarily lead to a final salvation or a better understanding.

The re-enactment and translation of images – as attested by the use of archival material – is an essential feature in Chen’s art, as though the repetition of an event could produce the necessary critical distance to consider the same event. History itself is the place of constant returns,

²³ *The Route*, realized in 2006. Regarding images’ circulation through time, Chen affirms: “Making reverberation refers to sounds that are amplified or delayed due to the spatial condition of the original sources. Images as well can circulate and unexpectedly reverberate in time under different historical contexts, and thus an altering archive can come into existence”. Chen, *Making Reverberation: Residue of Sounds and Images*, 102.

where past and present are put into dialogue.²⁴ Chen's technique can be compared to that of the rhizome, the concept developed by Deleuze and Guattari which can be roughly described as a privilege accorded to a horizontal growth instead of a vertical one: the connecting proliferating dynamics of roots' growth is more fertile than the expansion of branches and trunks towards the sky.²⁵ In his videos Chen operates in a similar way: a state of things is put into contact with a wider constellation of sense, and where the overall meaning is nourished by the association that one can establish between images, aural aspect and archival materials.

Considering 'translation' in terms of carrying across, transferring one thing from a place to another, it is notable how Chen's art involves a transfer, a translation of images from the past to the present, creating temporal cracks and fractures where visual returns and routes of images establish silent threads in what is felt as the Babelic disorder of history and of images' history. A translation that finds a privileged vehicle and medium in the body itself, which acts as a trans-language.

The author thanks Chen Chieh-jen for granting permission to use stills from his videos.

²⁴ See for instance *Realm of Reverberation* (2014).

²⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 1-27.

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