

# resistance at the margins

## chen chieh-jen

EUGENE TAN

History is a significant aspect of Taiwanese artist Chen Chieh-Jen's work. In particular, Taiwan's complex and traumatic history has served as the source of many of Chen's work. Both his early photographic works, as well as his subsequent film and video works examine explicitly the violence within this history, as well as the implicit violence that still exists in our societies today. In photographic works of the *Revolt in the Soul and Body* series he began in 1996, Chen uses historical photographs from 1900 to 1950 which he digitally manipulates, the latter year being when Martial Law was declared in Taiwan by the Kuomintang Government. In these works, such as *Genealogy of Self* (1996), Chen used a famous photograph of a *lingchi*, a Chinese method of execution, also commonly referred to as "death by a thousand cuts", in which the criminal is given opium and then slowly and methodically cut and bled to death in public. This photo, of the last known *lingchi* execution, was taken by a French photographer in 1905, the year that the practice was stopped. It has also been used to illustrate China's cruelty and barbarism, including the philosopher Georges Bataille in his book *Tears of Eros*. In this work, through the insertion of his own image as an onlooker, Chen highlights the public's attraction to the act of mutilation and the ambiguous relationship between horror and erotic ecstasy as posited by Bataille. This can also be seen in other works by Chen from this period, such as *The Rule of Law* (1997), which was based on the Wu-She incident in Taiwan in 1931. The photograph from which the work is based documents the aftermath of the Japanese colonisers' crackdown on a revolt by Taiwanese aboriginals, who with the help of a tribe of headhunters, killed and decapitated rebels from a rival tribe, and posed with one hundred and ten of the decapitated heads. In this work, Chen not only inserts himself into the image as the Japanese commander, but is also depicted holding his erect penis in his hand, in a graphic illustration of Bataille's writings. In these two works, Chen therefore highlights the violence that occurs under colonisation—while this is evident in *The Rule of Law*, in *Genealogy of Self*, the act of taking the photograph is considered an act of colonial appropriation, specifically in the way it was circulated and used in the West in its portrayal of China as being primitive.

Chen's examination of violence in Taiwan's history is extended in his more recent works, to the period of martial law from 1950 to 1987. These works also explore the intricate relationships between his personal experiences and memories with historical events in Taiwan, as well as global events and developments. *Military Court and Prison* (2008), was filmed at the former military court and prison in Xindian, which also housed prisoners arrested during the Kaohsiung Incident of 1979, in which the military broke up the country's first Human Rights Day celebration and arrested all the organisers who were leading members of the nascent democratic movement. It was subsequently revealed that the prisoners were subjected to various forms of torture and physical abuse. The building was then undergoing transformation into the Taiwan Human Rights Memorial when Chen filmed there. The historical significance of the site is juxtaposed with Chen's personal memory of the site, which stood across from the house in which he lived as a child. As such, as a child growing up and playing outside the prison walls was a part of everyday life for Chen, then unaware of the goings on within the prison. This close physical proximity to the site of a significant apparatus of State control bears an interesting relationship to Chen's own activities during Taiwan's period of martial law. After graduating in 1987 from a technical institute, Chen went on to become a prominent and controversial figure through his underground performances and other activities. *Military Court and Prison* therefore engages with the institutionalisation of violence by States during martial law and with its unseen and marginalised victims. This concern with the marginalised absent is a consistent and important aspect of his work, which can be seen to flow through to his filmmaking. In *Military Court and Prison*, Chen had invited unemployed and foreign workers as well as illegal immigrants to be part of the film. However, several of the illegal immigrants were arrested days before filming was to begin. Their presence, like those of the victims of the court and prison, becomes all the more powerful through their absence.

Other recent works by Chen examine violence as played out within the contexts of neo-liberalism and capitalism, while continuing to explore this relationship between the personal and wider society. A part of *Empire's Borders I* (2008-09), which was shown at the Taiwan Pavilion at this year's Venice Biennale, depicts the experiences of Taiwanese citizens applying for a visa to travel to the USA at the American Institute in Taiwan. This work resulted from Chen's own experiences when applying for a visa to participate in an exhibition in America. After this experience, Chen started a blog



Above: Chen Chieh-Jen, *The Route* (video stills), 2006 Photos courtesy the artist



entitled 'The Illegal Immigrant', inviting those who had suffered similar humiliating experiences to share them. The title of the work references Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's 2000 book, *Empire*, in which they posit that economic relations in the age of globalisation have resulted in a new global order and logic of rule in which these relations have become autonomous from political controls, where capital now assumes a new sovereignty and power. They argue that in this new "empire", in which the creation of wealth becomes the overriding principle, "Capital is faced with a smooth world—or really, a world defined by new and complex regimes of differentiation and homogenisation, deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation."<sup>1</sup> As such, the difficulties faced by Taiwanese citizens, as well as citizens of other economically less developed or marginal countries, stem from the fact that such people wanting to travel to the USA are perceived as potential illegal immigrants. This work also reflects in many ways, the political marginalisation of Taiwan, when in the 1980s the international community replaced its recognition with that of the People's Republic of China, thus leaving Taiwan politically isolated. This anachronistic relationship with China is also explored in *Empire's Borders I*, where Chen complicates the perception of Taiwanese as victims. The second part of the work also depicts the same humiliating experience that mainland



Chinese women face when arriving at Taoyuan airport in Taiwan to be reunited with their Taiwanese spouses. *Empire's Borders I* therefore explores the complex relationship between Taiwanese and global society, one framed by neo-liberalism and capitalism, but yet one derived from a deeply personal perspective. In this work, we also see the transition Chen has made into the real socio-political sphere through his blog—which has attracted much controversy—and which is also present in his other works. Chen's engagement with economic globalisation and its inherent violence can be seen in a film from 2003, which has since has been perceived as his seminal work. *The Factory*, reflects upon the effects of globalisation on local and marginalised communities. Filmed in a disused garment factory, Chen invited its former workers to return to their place of work. The haunting silent film shows mainly women who have aged, moving through their once workplace, among the machines and other equipment left behind, unwanted, just like the workers, as the factories relocate to cities in China with their lower costs and wages. As Chen has said of this work:

*In places all over the world, many labourers have had similar experiences—a production relationship between the 'transplanted' and the 'untransplanted.' In order to find low-priced labour, factories constantly shift locales. But after being abandoned, unemployed workers have no choice but to linger on in the same place. They cannot move.*<sup>2</sup>

Such effects of globalisation are further explored in *Bade Area* (2005) and *On Going* (2006) (presented at the APT6). In *Bade Area*, we see people moving furniture meaninglessly around inside a building. These people were workers from a nearby car factory that had shut down overnight, leaving them unpaid and left to find other means to make a living. *On Going* explores the disjointed and disorienting experience of globalisation through the experience of a lone worker working in a half occupied modern office building, reflecting the optimism and more economically active times that were anticipated when the building was built. In highlighting how these partially occupied modern office blocks have succumbed to the same fate as the hurriedly deserted factories, Chen reflects upon the overwhelming effects of globalisation, where no-one is spared.

While *The Factory*, *Bade Area* and *On Going* present now familiar aspects on globalisation, *The Route* (2006), highlights an additional outlook. *The Route* was inspired by the Liverpool dockworkers strike in 1995 and the events surrounding the Neptune Jade in 1997, in which the ship was unable to unload its cargo due to the strike. As the ship sailed around the world, from Oakland to Vancouver and Yokohama and Kobe in Japan, dockworkers refused to unload it in a show of solidarity with the Liverpool dockers. The ship eventually sailed to the port of Kaoshiung, Taiwan, where it was renamed and auctioned off, together with its cargo. *The Route* highlights, among other things, the rare incidents where union solidarity has been effective in subverting the interests of global capital. A further significant outcome of this work is the real change that was effected during *The Route's* making. The reason that the ship was able to be unloaded in Taiwan was due to the fact that Kaoshiung dockworkers could only communicate in Taiwanese and were unaware of global events, which in many ways reflected Taiwan's isolation from the international community. Through Chen, the workers became aware of the Neptune Jade and the dockworker strikes as well as their implication in the incident, and for *The Route*, the dockers' union together with the workers organised a symbolic picket line, as seen in the film. Although too late to have any bearing on the boycotting of the ship, their actions nevertheless signify how art has the potential to affect real change. This is where the significance of Chen's work lies. Instead of merely reflecting upon the injustices of our society, his work, in a reflexive way, transforms this reflection into real action and the potential for actual change.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 2000

<sup>2</sup> Chen Chieh-Jen, *Factory*, 2003, artist's statement