History repeating itself

by 巴诺亚

Taiwanese artist Chen Chieh-jen said at the opening of On the Empire's Borders, his current show at Taipei Fine Arts Museum, that he would never again exhibit there. And that's not the first time he has berated Taiwan's top public institution for contemporary art

A sign posted on the wall at On the Empire's Borders (在帝国的边界上), a retrospective exhibit at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum covering the work of Chen Chieh-jen (陈界仁) from 1996 to 2010, advises visitors to exercise discretion as they "might find some of the works in this exhibition inappropriate."

It's the word "inappropriate" that gives pause for thought. Though referring nominally to the violent and graphic content within — scenes of torture in the three-channel video Lingchi — Echoes of a Historical Photograph (凌迟考:一张历史照片的回音), or piles of naked and deformed bodies in a mural-sized photograph from Revolt in the Soul & Body 1900-1999 (魂魄暴乱 1900-1999) — it could also serve to warn viewers that Chen's work is going to offer up a version of history that many would prefer to forget or ignore.

From criticism of political and economic policies implemented under the Chinese National Party's (KMT) authoritarian regime during the Martial Law era, to the "border policies" of the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) and Taiwan's National Immigration Agency, Chen's body of work takes aim at what the artist sees as a global neoliberal system that limits or restricts people's freedom of expression and movement.

Chen bases his work on his "own living or social experience," and focuses on the people most adversely affected by the neoliberal system — the working classes and the poor. For Factory (加工厂), a 2003 video, Chen invited unemployed women to revisit the garment factory where they once worked to reenact their jobs. Day laborers and Chen's unemployed acquaintances form the main actors in Bade Area (八德), a 2005 video shot in Taoyuan County's Bade City, an industrial area that has seen many of its factories move to China.

More recently, Chen's experience of being "crudely accused ... of intending to remain in the US illegally" when applying for a visa in 2008 provided the impetus for Empire's Borders I (帝国边界 I), an at times heart-wrenching two-part video based on The Illegal Immigrant (我怀疑你是要偷渡), a blog he set up after his encounter with AIT.

The first part recounts the stories of eight Taiwanese women who have been denied a visa to the US, while the second looks at nine Chinese brides who were "discriminated" against by Taiwan's National Immigration Agency.

An internationally respected artist, the 50-year-old Chen has shown at several biennials including Venice, Liverpool and Istanbul. He is currently participating in the Shanghai Biennale, which runs through Jan. 23.

Taipei Times: Are you experiencing any problems with the Shanghai Biennale?

Chen Chieh-jen: As you know, China is ruled by one party and there is censorship. So my work will of course encounter some problems there. It's like Taiwan before Martial Law was lifted.

This year's curators are quite radical in that they are trying to push the limits [of censorship], and I wanted to help them. Before the lifting of Martial Law in Taiwan, people fought against censorship — and they did it gradually, one step at a time. And these curators wanted to invite me as a means of testing the boundaries. I agreed despite the reality that censorship still exists in China.

TT: Which works of yours will appear in the biennial?

CC: The Route (路径图), a video that examines the relationship, or the conflict, between capitalists — the factory owners — and laborers. I've already passed the censors and my work will be exhibited. But the conflict between bosses and laborers is a sensitive issue in China, much like the conflict in Taiwan between those who want to unify with China and those who want it to be independent.

But to my mind we are in the framework of neoliberalism and for me that means that the [socioeconomic] classes in these different countries are very much connected. I think we should be united as one people in the world and we should always support the pursuit of more freedom in our creativity and the freedom of our speech. I want to make this clear. Otherwise people would challenge me about my criticism of TFAM while at the same time exhibiting my work in Shanghai.

TT: What are your criticisms of TFAM?

CC: First, I want to state that I support international exchanges. I also completely support cross-strait exchanges. But I oppose [TFAM's] neoliberalist style of exchanges.

TT: What do you mean by "neoliberalist style of exchanges?"

CC: I mean for the past two years TFAM has hosted a lot of [large-scale] exhibitions and has invested a lot in these exhibitions. But there has been no dialogue. TFAM spent a lot of money on television commercials to increase ticket sales and these exhibitions always occupy an important space [in the museum]. But they are not cultural exchanges.

What these exhibitions are telling us is that if someone is very famous in the West, we will bring them here. But there is no dialogue. The Pixar exhibition or Philadelphia Museum exhibition [Manet to Picasso: Masterpieces From the Philadelphia Museum of Art] are like the great capitalists telling us what [we need] through television commercials and all kinds of promotion. This is not a dialogue.

Art is about imagination. You don't actually need a lot of money to organize and host an imaginative exhibition. But TFAM has stopped listening to Taiwan's art community. TFAM thinks it can invest money in television commercials and draw a lot of visitors to these exhibitions. For TFAM, that equals success. But despite selling tickets and making a lot of money, what does TFAM get? Not much. These exhibits come and go, but they don't contribute anything to the culture of Taiwan.

TT: What's the remedy?

CC: I think the museum should start telling us what the [exhibition] contract terms are because at present we don't know. We have every reason to [believe] that TFAM hosts these exhibitions for political purposes. The museum wants to show the people of Taiwan that it only had maybe 300,000 visitors in the past, but with these special exhibitions it can attract 1 million. I mean, Pixar attracted 400,000 visitors to the museum. But that's Pixar's success, not TFAM's.

I'm not saying that we shouldn't have had the Pixar exhibition. But it should have become a dialogue through which we can think about why Pixar is so successful and why Hollywood movies have already penetrated all the cinemas in Taiwan. If we can include this, it would not be as unidirectional as Pixar was.

TT: It seems that artists are becoming more vocal in their condemnation of the country's art world …

CC: That's because everyone is fed up with it!

TT: Tsong Pu's (庄普) exhibit in the spring, for example, criticized TFAM's policy of relegating established Taiwanese artists to its basement space. More recently, Shi Jin-hua (石晋华) criticized the publishing industry for trading works of art for cover stories. Do you think public criticism like yours will change the way Taiwan's art world operates?

CC: This is the only thing left for us to do. We don't really have any other choice. But I also realize that by doing this many will misunderstand what I'm trying to do — especially those who don't keep close tabs on the art world. They will say things like: "Why are you only criticizing them now? Why not before?" Or, "Why haven't we offered [TFAM] suggestions?" But we've offered the museum advice on several previous occasions. Over the past two years we've constantly criticized the museum and offered alternative suggestions, but it doesn't listen.

The art world is quite small and those outside of it haven't heard of these problems before. That's why I took that opportunity to criticize, in the hope that the media will pay attention.

TT: Will publicizing your criticisms have an effect?

CC: I think so. It's like I just said about Martial Law: This has to be taken one step at a time. In

1985, during the Martial Law era, the first director of TFAM damaged a work of art. Three of us sued her. Politics at that time was pretty sensitive because of Martial Law. But because art is within the cultural realm, the media could pay attention and criticize the director at that time.

[In 1985, TFAM's first director, Su Jui-ping (苏瑞屏), destroyed an installation by Taiwanese artist Chang Chien-fu (张建富). As a result, Chen refused to exhibit at the museum for the following 11 years. In the same year, Su had a sculpture by Lee Tsai-chien (李再钤) re-painted without the artist's permission. Su stepped down in 1986 under pressure from the art community and criticism in the press.]

TT: Is it fair to say that the problems with TFAM's director in 1985 and the ones with the incumbent are quite similar?

CC: In the past it was due to Martial Law. Today it is due to neoliberalism. So there is still much work to be done. I think there is a continuum. Even though the reason is different, there is a continuum in the way [the museum] is handled. I see them in two ways: The first was tangible. They used tangible means to limit our freedom of speech. But nowadays we see these intangible forces that use commercial considerations to exclude the marginal or alternative art.

TT: The current exhibit shows work between 1996 and today. Why is there nothing from before this period?

CC: I created some artworks in my 20s and then I stopped at age 26 or 27 and then resumed my artwork in 1996. From 17 to 27 I made experimental movies, installation art and performance art. But I increasingly felt that there was a problem with these mediums, that they were empty and detached from my experience, my society ... At that time I didn't know how to create works based on my own living experience or social experience. There was no precedence.

During the Martial Law era I couldn't discuss this with anyone. In 1985, I got to know some people who were active in social movements. But the social movements and art movements at that time each followed their own paths. I wasn't too sure how to bring these two disparate things together.

TT: How did that change for you?

CC: In 1987, Martial Law was lifted so people started to criticize the KMT. But for me, that was too simplistic. I grew up in the Martial Law era. I know that consciously or subconsciously my upbringing and ideas were influenced by Martial Law. I didn't simply want to criticize the KMT, but also reflect upon my inner self.

Another reason is that from 1960 until 1990, Taiwan was the world's factory. So I asked myself, "What is Martial Law?" I don't want to simplify it to one-party authoritarian rule. I want to analyze further the complexity of Martial Law. On the one hand, the US supported this authoritarian KMT while at the same time promoting US values and culture, which results in a big

influence politically, economically and socially. That's why Taiwan became the world's factory in the 1960s. The highly polluting industries in the US were moving out at that time.

TT: Why did you stop making art between 1987 and 1996, and how did that hiatus influence your later work?

CC: To think about these issues and to return to the place where I was born. It is most genuine when we start from our own modernization experience because we know the causes and consequences and we know the reasons and the origins. I thought that I could develop an aesthetic out of that.

From the Martial Law era until now, we have been living in this lunatic state. I'm using this, of course, as a metaphor. It's like TFAM. We are talking about one thing, but TFAM thinks we are talking about another. That epitomizes our society. People with opposing views cannot calm down and listen and have a dialogue.

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