

ARTFORUM

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PRINT FEBRUARY 2020

OPENINGS: TIANZHUO CHEN

Travis Jeppesen on Tianzhuo Chen



Tianzhuo Chen, *ADAHA*, 2014. Performance view, Bank, Shanghai, July 19, 2014. Photo: Zhuang Yan.

TIANZHUO CHEN'S PROJECTS and personae radiate a new animism: His chthonic protagonists carry ancient feelings, yet arrive like fresh symbols to our world. His performances—whether in theaters, museums, or nightclubs—are neo-Taoist hallucinations in

which anarchy is joyfully permitted to take over, to override and overwrite the horrific banalities of the present. Chen invites the audience to wander through these spaces: to gaze, to daze, to, as in last year's *Trance*, dance and meditate to hazy beats as they glide past diaphanous bodies. This immersive protocol is suffused with Chen's own yearning for transcendence, that fiery demand to *get beyond* this body, along with the dread that maybe this is all we've really got.



Tianzhuo Chen, *An Atypical Brain Damage*, 2017. Performance view, Steirischer Herbst, Dom im Berg, Graz, Austria, October 12, 2017. Photo: Peiyu Shen.

Chen was born in Beijing in 1985, leaving in 2007 to pursue undergraduate and graduate art degrees in London. In the United Kingdom, he was exposed to the local clubbing and electronic-music scenes; he returned to China in 2011 and executed his first major performance, *ADAHA*, at Shanghai's Bank gallery in 2014. If his work manages to appear alien to Chinese and foreign audiences alike (the vast majority of his performances so far have taken place in Europe, whose more generous funding for theater can support Chen's maximalist visions), it is because it so fluidly bends and merges elements from East and West

into a twisted, defamiliarizing dreamworld the neoliberal overlords of globalization are unlikely ever to fathom.



Tianzhuo Chen, *Trance*, 2019. Performance view, M Woods, Beijing, October 31, 2019. Photos: Peiyu Shen.

When you first enter one of Chen's performance scenarios, there's a sense that you've wandered into a *Gesamtkunstwerk* adapted for our century's soulless technosphere. Take his best-known work to date, *An Atypical Brain Damage*, 2017, an operatic piece that "stars" Baby China Yu—an imperial, corpulent performer and fashion designer here decked in matronly drag—and the rake-thin nouveau-butoh dancer Beio. Like all of Chen's works, *Brain Damage* rejects linear narrative. In the director's-cut version on the artist's website—a nineteen-minute condensation of the original ninety-minute performance that can be considered a new work arising from the original (Chen heavily revises each iteration of his performances)—a pale sliver of light illuminates a car, its front half painted with a dragon tattoo like a parody of a Western fantasy of a yakuza boss's BMW, its rear half tricked out like

a police car complete with siren on top: East and West, law and lawlessness on hand to complement and pervert one another. Behind it all, an Apple logo flickers. Beio wears the backbone of a dinosaur, his nude body painted white, with red bands up and down his arms, an extra pair of eyes glued onto his cheeks, and gold grills running across both rows of teeth. He crouches in an arrangement of forested foliage and fossilage, arches his saurian spine, and slowly gesticulates to an ambient soundscape. Beneath a strobe, an immaculately groomed stud (Igor Dewe, of the Parisian art collective House of Drama, several of whose members also appear) clad only in a snakeskin apron and black rubber gloves cleanses the bodies of two middle-aged brothers Chen met in Vietnam—Le Ngoc Thanh and Le Duc Hai—on a mortician’s table. A female performer, Amélie Poulain, soliloquizes about an unnameable disease with which she has been afflicted. Beio has transformed into a dog and runs barking around the standing audience’s feet; a topless female dancer, Ylva Falk (who co-choreographed the piece with Chen) marches soldierlike across the stage; while the Le brothers—now carrying machine guns and sporting bright Justin Bieber tracksuits—crawl across the floor on their bellies, incanting in Vietnamese: “We are living in a Communist country. You want to write, you want to speak, but you are not allowed to. Only through art, we can reveal the shadow of the shadow.” Baby China Yu, now perched atop the car, sings Enya’s “Only Time,” twisting the anthem into a screaming hell. The violence escalates. China Yu bashes the car windows with a baseball bat, then—strobe-lit, accompanied by throbbing synths, and having donned a long brown wig and nightgown like a Japanese horror villainess—slashes his way through the crowd with a butcher knife covered in blood. Are we at a rave or trapped inside someone’s projection of collective madness? It doesn’t matter: Here, confusion is sweeter than truth.

Chen’s immersive protocol is suffused with his own yearning for transcendence, that fiery demand to get *beyond* this body, along with the dread that maybe this is all we’ve really got.



Tianzhuo Chen, *Trance*, 2019. Performance view, M Woods, Beijing, October 31, 2019. Photos: Peiyu Shen.

These are, of course, mere flashes of an unrelenting extravaganza that repels summarization. If *An Atypical Brain Damage* was the synesthetic expression of an Artaudian cross-cultural psychosis set to noise, dubstep, trance, house music, techno, and electropop—as well as to new hybrid forms of avant-garde EDM whose ground zero is currently Shanghai’s All club, Chen’s weekend hangout and a convergence point for the younger, more progressive elements of the city’s art and clubbing cultures—some were perhaps wont to dismiss his work as pure spectacle or fashion rather than allow themselves to give in to its seductive weirdness. Wherever the performances end up—Chen also runs a “party label,” Asian Dope Boys, that showcases experimental DJs and musicians—his settings consistently become sites of orgiastic resistance against all governing structures, which can be viewed as equally and innately authoritarian.



Tianzhuo Chen, *Trance*, 2019. Performance view, M Woods, Beijing, October 31, 2019. Photos: Peiyu Shen.

Despite his emphasis on the experiential, Chen by no means neglects the conceptual. As is the controlled chaos of Ryan Trecartin and Lizzie Fitch's videos, Chen's anarchic displays are intricately scripted. His latest and most ambitious work to date, the twelve-hour-long *Trance*, 2019, colorfully and noisily unfurled itself over three iterations at Beijing's M Woods this past autumn. *Trance* was divided into six chapters and played out like a ritual, encompassing the totality of the museum's multiroom space. The first part was inspired by a fourteenth-century Japanese painting series portraying the nine phases of death according to the Mahayana sutras. (Chen is a Tibetan Buddhist and has long been fascinated by the depictions of gods as mythical creatures in the sacred literature.) The second chapter took its cues from Susan Sontag's 1967 novel *Death Kit*, which blurs the distinction between quotidian and dream; appropriately, Chen's dancers and performers entered a hypnotic state as they moved through the galleries. Dancers traded off performing solos in the third chapter, while Khng Khan

transformed the Tibetan text *Delog Dawa Drolma* into a hip-hop song. Chapter four tapped into the crazed, mystical revelations of Antonin Artaud's fateful trip to Ireland in 1937 and the letters in which he claimed to have encountered the end of the world, while chapter five added William Blake's own apocalyptic revelations. Finally, the work's music, rhythm, and energy coalesced into a wild party, bringing audience and performers together to dance as lights flashed and flower petals and feathers floated down from the ceiling.



Tianzhuo Chen, *Trance*, 2019. Performance view, M Woods, Beijing, October 31, 2019. Photos: Peiyu Shen.

Chen's persistent elevation of the freak to divine guru is a form of spiritual activism. What unites works like *An Atypical Brain Damage* and *Trance*—as well as his paintings, sculptures, and videos, often exhibited as stand-alone elements—is not only the singularity of Chen's aesthetics of excess but also his quest for the discovery of a third plane beyond immanence *and* transcendence: a sphere in which death and life are not mutually exclusive, where an endless, blissed-out loop populated by beings gorgeous and perverse, mythical and human, reigns. A sphere that refuses the burden of a name.

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