

Press Release

Chen Chieh-jen: Detoxify Illusion with Māyā

August 5 2023 - October 22 2023
Long March Space, Beijing

*So I vow that until all of them have achieved enlightenment,
only then will I attain Supreme Wisdom*

Prabhacaksuh (a previous incarnation of the Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva)

From August 5 to October 22, 2023, Chen Chieh-jen's solo exhibition "Detoxify Illusion with Māyā" will be presented at Long March Space, featuring three of the artist's latest video works from the past two years: *In a World Losing Multiple Worlds I*, *In a World Losing Multiple Worlds II* (2022) and *Worn Away* (2022–2023), as well as six documents.

An empire constructed by a corporatocracy of multinational financial-capital corporations, military-industrial complexes, and digital and biotech giants manipulates the world's perceptual pathways, senses, desires, and the mindset of the vast majority of the world's population through a pervasive control technology that is run through the global Internet system.

The top 81 billionaires, those who run the corporatocracy, own more than half of the world's wealth. More than one-eighth of the world's population (about one billion people) suffer from mental health-related disorders. As the neocolonialism / new caste system of the empire becomes a reality, beginning with *Notes on the Twelve Karmas* (1999–2000 / re-edited 2018), Chen Chieh-jen has brought to life poignant and sensuous meditations that reflect on the possibilities of the multitude, which, increasingly ostracized by the acceleration of this centrifugal machine, now confronts the question of how to rebuild its subjectivity and reshape society in an era that pretends towards transparency, while effectively tightening supervision and control. The long-term art project *Her and Her Children* includes an introduction, *In a World Losing Multiple Worlds I & II*, a prologue, *Worn Away*, a first chapter, *A Field of Non-Field* (2017), and prospective chapters that engage a network of related subjects from different aspects. These video works can be experienced independently, or watched sequentially to create a cohesive dialogue and discussion that reverberates through the pieces.

The creation of illusion has always been a crucial technique of the empire, one used to manipulate human perception. But unlike Plato's famous allegory of the cave, in which illusion and reality are regarded as absolute opposites, the empires of the present operate by way of a deliberate confusion of the two. They enact a qualitative transformation of certain progressive viewpoints, conjuring something that is harmless to the empire, but that corrodes true political economy, etc., while also luring the multitude into a labyrinth of pseudo-multiculturalism and self-consuming internal struggles. Our perception of the world, our very ability to perceive it accurately, determines the futures we imagine. Whether we develop methods of breaking away from the empire's pervasive control technology is not only a vital issue to politics in the broad sense of the word, it is also an essential part of each person's mandate to construct their own subjectivity. It is the reason why art is necessary.

For Chen Chieh-jen, confronting the empire's pervasive control technology demands a reevaluation of fundamental issues in human society, including the concept of "illusion." To address this, Chen Chieh-jen draws on the Buddhist perspective of "māyā" (illusion) to unravel the empire's construction of illusion. Māyā refers to the notion of all things being in a state of constant flux. It is the operating principle and reason why all things unite, form, exist, decay and pass away. Understanding this notion, one realizes that all things come from interdependence and interaction, or what the Buddha called *Tathatā*. The Buddha's primary concern in presenting this dialectical view was to break down the caste system that had been constructed by the Brahmin class through a vast mythological narrative. By pointing

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out that nothing has an absolute, unchanging nature, the Buddha is saying that sentient beings (all species included) are equal, and no distinctions can be made concerning blood, race, or culture.

Chen Chieh-jen's invocation of the Buddhist concept of *māyā* aims to deconstruct the empire's naturalized neo-colonial / new caste system in pursuit of a vision of future in which all beings are equal. In terms of cultural and artistic production, the key is not whether the content of the work is accurate or fictional, or in the choice of the media employed, but in whether it opens up various pathways to an egalitarian society under the neo-colonial / neo-caste system.

As the title suggests, *In a World Losing Multiple Worlds I & II* evokes the absence of an external world where we might escape from the current world. A solitary figure stands silently in the desolate night, continuously enveloped and pierced by rain, from natural rainwater to a shower of information that resembles rain, in a tableau that evokes the condition of the contemporary individual. Yet the figure maintains a calm and contemplative face that suggests an ongoing contention with the influx of endless and ever-changing information flows.

In the 69'30" video, *Worn Away*, the narrative begins with human society entering a new dark age. An unemployed person, unable to apply for credit, arrives at the "transit area" after opting for the empire's alternative: the "Optimization of Biological Function Assistance Program." While waiting to become a consumable for biological experiments, the person gradually realizes that other seemingly "useless" outcasts are rebuilding an alternative epistemology, now that all other alternatives have been exhausted.

In one of the six documents, *Śūnyatā* (2020 / video / lecture-performance), Chen Chieh-jen, recalling the words of his mother, realizes that since the beginning of humankind there has been a struggle between two strategies of illusion: "the paradise control technique" and "the śūnyatā awareness technique." The former represents the empire's current employment of a pervasive control technology, while the latter is a dialectical process of illusion-making and illusion-detoxifying. If one hopes to alter the empire's ongoing naturalization of the neo-colonial / new caste system, one must first subvert the empire's implantation of life values and worldviews—which can only be achieved through plain and simple language.

About the artist

Chen Chieh-jen was born in 1960 in Taoyuan, and currently lives and works in Taipei. While Chen's primary media is video installation, in his production process, he has consistently experimented with community formation, integrating other participants with his film crew. This has added an activist quality directed at re-envisioning society in his creative process.

During Taiwan's martial law period (1949–1987), a time marked by the Cold War, Chen employed extra-institutional underground exhibitions and guerrilla-style art actions to challenge dominant political mechanisms. After martial law ended, Chen gradually ceased making art, which lasted for eight years. Returning to art in 1996, Chen started collaborating with local residents, unemployed laborers, day workers, migrant workers, foreign spouses, unemployed youth and social activists. They occupied factories owned by capitalists and utilized discarded materials to build sets for his video productions. In order to visualize contemporary reality and a people's history that has been obscured by neoliberalism, Chen embarked on a number of video projects in which he used strategies he calls "re-imagining, re-narrating, re-writing and re-connecting."

Starting in 2010, Chen began actively focusing on the fact that many people around the world have been reduced to working temporary jobs and lost sense of existence due to and lost sense of existence due to the corporatocracy's pervasive control technology. Chen calls this universal situation "global imprisonment" or "at-home exile." Based on these ruminations, Chen has considered how pervasive control technology can be qualitatively changed by transforming desire with alternative forms of desire and detoxifying illusion with *māyā*.

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