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**The Gaze of Revolt:**

**Historic Iconography Perverted**

**Cultural Dilemmas During Transitions**

**Warsaw**

**Joyce C. H. Liu**

## 1. Historical Traumas and Cultural Memories

**This paper poses a basic question: How are our cultural memories constructed and how do they affect our historic consciousness? This question leads to a series of related questions: How do we remember our past? How do we interpret the moments of historical traumas, the moments that diverted the path of history? How are these moments recorded, reconstructed and disseminated as cultural and political educational tools, by whom, and through what apparatus? What has been screened off through this apparatus and thus never entered our consciousness?** Are we aware of the void in the particular system of our epistemology? These questions are significant because our notion of history, our attitude towards ethnic differences, and our cultural identities and cultural policies are all shaped by our knowledge or our ignorance of the past, and these issues have erupted on the surface of contemporary Taiwan society during the past decade, that is, the post-martial law period.

I intend to contrast two sets of visual texts in the following discussions so as to probe into the above stated issues. The first group of visual texts is selected from the series of the 2-28 Commemorative Exhibitions, held by Taipei Fine Arts Museum from 1996 until 1999. I want to focus on the cultural iconography forged by the collective efforts manifested through these exhibitions that aimed at the search for a clear Taiwanese identity. I would then like to focus on the images of horror that Chen Chieh-jen, a contemporary artist who was invited to join the 2-28 Commemorative Exhibition in 1998, and discuss how his *Revolt in the Soul and Body* series reveal for us a different mode of attitude toward history.

The post-martial law period, beginning in 1987, has seen a dramatic shift of

political as well as cultural paradigms in Taiwan. This shift of cultural paradigms can be described as a transition from the mainland-centered cultural consciousness to the demand for a Taiwanese-local identity, a shift from a Chinese consciousness to a Taiwanese consciousness. This cultural transition toward a local-oriented identity actually started from the mid-1970s, when Taiwan's political status was undergoing a gradual process of isolation from the international arena.<sup>1</sup> This gradual change was reinforced by the open confrontation between the Kuomintang (KMT) government and the members of the "dangwai" (literally, "outside of the [KMT/nationalist] party") movement, in the Kaohsiung Incident in 1979. The lifting of martial law in 1987 can be viewed as a symbolic gesture of cultural consensus that had been formed through this long process of transition. This symbolic turning point quickened the pace of the follow-up changes, such as the first democratic legislative election in 1992, the first presidential election in 1996, and the turning over from the KMT government to the DPP government in 2000. Along with this process of transformation, there emerged massive movements and demands for the reconstruction of Taiwanese identities.<sup>3</sup> We can perceive the discourse of Taiwanese identity construction in all cultural forms in the 1990s, including public debates, political campaigns, scholarship, drama, dance, literature, film, and naturally also visual arts.<sup>4</sup> *The 1996 Taipei Biennial: The Quest for Identity* and the 2-28 Commemorative Exhibitions from 1996 to 1999 are typical examples of that wave of such reinforced demand for identity construction.

In analyzing the visual images presented in the series of the 2-28 Commemorative Exhibitions, we will soon realize that these images speak of the impulses that are parallel to the complex dynamics of the concurrent Taiwanese society. As a whole, the 2-28 series reveals an impulse to return to the disconnected

Taiwanese past and to narrate the historical incident and hence interpolate the communal sense of identical cultural and political positions. On the other hand, Chen Chieh-jen's digital-photographic images of certain moments of historic traumas, which I take as a contrast, differ drastically from the other historically realistic and narrative-oriented works. Chen's images question the limits of our knowledge and understanding of the historical reality, the problems of our identity and subjectivity, and the cause for such limitations.

I want to point out that Chen's images of ugliness and horror function as a certain mode of the gaze, a gaze of revolt, a revolt seen not in physical transgression of the law but in a critical questioning that then reverses our perception. Such gaze of revolt is close to what Julia Kristeva discussed in her recent book *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt*<sup>5</sup> that in anamnesis and in art the subject/artist retrieves the memories of the trauma, works through and works out of his individual problems, and the psychical space is thus renewed (28). Chen's gaze of revolt, furthermore, takes us to resist the normalizing, institutionalizing and regulating mode of the gaze, which the 2-28 Commemorative Exhibitions clearly demonstrated, and to look into the various displacement in the scenes of the trauma as well as the hidden violence and cruelty of history behind it.

## **2. The February 28 Incident Commemorative Exhibitions: the constructions of cultural iconography**

### **2.1 The 2-28 Commemorative Exhibitions**

Let us first take a look of the series of the 2-28 Commemorative Exhibitions of

the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, and see how contemporary Taiwanese artists present one of the most tragic events in Taiwan history. Chen Shui-bian, currently the president in Taiwan, then the mayor of Taipei, first initiated this series of annual exhibitions in 1996. These four exhibitions presented an emblematic performance of the collective impulse to re-orient people's position in Taiwan history and thus exercised the normalizing, institutionalizing and regulating function of the museum and consequently attracted a corresponding mode of the gaze from the audience.

The February 28 Incident of 1947<sup>6</sup> caused the death of thousands of civilians--ranging from 18,000 to 28,000, according to different reports--mostly local leaders such as lawyers, doctors, scholars, and students.<sup>7</sup> The February 28 Incident marked the beginning of the "white terror" and was a major factor behind the long period of martial law (1950-1987). For over forty years, this historical tragedy was silenced, as if effaced from history and people's consciousness. It was not until 1987, a few months before the government announced the end of martial law, that a local group, the "2-28 Peace Promotion Association," petitioned the government to reveal the historical facts of the February 28 Incident. In 1991, the official report on the February 28 Incident was finally published, and it was followed by hundreds of books, oral histories and conferences on the same historical event.

The Taipei Fine Arts Museum's 2-28 Commemorative Exhibition in 1996, *Remembrance and Reflection*, was literally the "first" collective and official act to extend people's reflections on the traumatic event through artistic form.<sup>8</sup> The emblematic and performative aspects of the four 2-28 exhibitions lie in the fact that parallel eagerness exists in contemporary Taiwanese society to search for the missing link with the past. After being erased from history and public discourse for over forty

years, the February 28 Incident was revealed to be the primal scene of the historical trauma in the collective memory, the moment at which the separated mother-country arrived, opened her arms, and revealed her ferocious and bloodthirsty face, and executed the scene of castration. Psychoanalytically speaking, to look at the past and to name it is the first step toward acknowledging the traumatic moment, the repression, the damage, and to reclaim the people's subjectivity.

According to Lin Mun-lee, the director of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, the first exhibition in 1996 focused on memorializing the February 28 Incident and showed “pieces both directly and indirectly related to the incident, including essays and photographs” and thus contained “educational and historical significance” (Lin Mun-lee 1998, 7). The theme of the second exhibition was “Sadness Transformed” and indicated the purpose to transcend beyond the historical trauma. Apparently this “sublimation” could not feed people's expectation and was thus criticized extendedly. Hsiao Chong-ray, a contemporary scholar of art history, remarked with discontent, “some internationally renown artist even presented his old abstract water ink piece and claimed that it fits the theme of sublimation” (Hsiao Chong-Ray 14). Chen Shui-bian, still the Taipei mayor, also stressed specifically that the exhibition in 1998, *Reflection and Reconsideration*, has to “bring the artists' work back around to the actual event, to demand that the artists look closely at the event and enter into the historical circumstances surrounding it” (Chen Shui-bian 5).<sup>9</sup> Hsiao, the curator of the 1998 exhibition, invited twenty-six artists of the “post 2-28 generation,” those who were born after 1947, who did not experience this tragic event themselves but were mature and bold enough to investigate this historical tragedy retrospectively and critically (Hsiao 15). Though the designs of the posters of the previous three exhibitions indicated the tendency to move to a more reflexive and abstract

representation of the traumatic scene, the proclaimed purpose of the 1998 exhibition was still to “bring the focus of these pieces back to the incident itself” (Lin Mun-lee 1998, 7).



In the following year, the director, Lin, and the curator, Vince Shih, both stressed once again to come even closer to the historical event, to “recreate historical sites and images,” through the narratives of 30 historical scenes selected and arranged chronologically by Vince Shih, with the hope that the exhibition could “enter and understand history” (Shih 10-20; Lin 1999, 7).

## 2.2 The narrative and historical impulse

The intention to construct an appropriate cultural iconography through returning to and narrating the traumatic historic moment is manifest in these exhibitions.<sup>10</sup> For example, in *Changing Cloud* by Chou Meng-te (1953-), we see a street scene in which troops were arresting people in revolt. In *Appeal for Justice and Take Revenge* by Kuo Bor-Jou (1960-), we see a mixed-media installation that includes old photographs and video images recounting the tragic event. Both examples reveal a clear inclination towards realistic narrative and teleological accusation.



In the 1999 exhibition, we find similar characteristics in *Landing at Keelung* by Su Hsin-tien (1940-), for example, in which we see the re-mapping of the climatic moment in which the armed KMT troops landed at Keelung and started the bloody massacre. In *False Promises* by Vince Shih (1947-) the curator's own work, again, we see an installation with a distorted KMT icon and a red cloth hanging on the wall, inscribed with the text of the military commander Chen Yi's official radio announcement, and another red cloth covering a mold of Taiwan island, surrounded by an array of butcher's knives on chopping boards.



The narrative motives with allegorical interpretations and historical references are clearly stated in these visual texts. The subject position these artists take is apparent in these works. The museum's role to promote people's local identities that can be sutured with the state ideological apparatus is also clear in this regard. The



February 28 Incident became the stigma of the KMT government through which the Democratic Progressive Party accused it of being an outsider regime of oppressors and then summoned the “Taiwanese” to rise up and gain the ruling power. This prompts the alarming question: Has this aspect of the February 28 Incident become a frozen moment in history and a fetishized object of Taiwanese people, thus blocking people’s perception of the “historic real” and the layers of contingency behind this spot in time? We also need to ask: Does this interpretation of history handicap our interpretation or tolerance of the ethnic differences among the “Taiwanese” people? The label “Taiwanese” has been homogenized in this context as the group of people who immigrated from the mainland in the Qing dynasty and including other groups such as the native tribes of Taiwan, the Hakka, the 1949 immigrants, and the rest.

### **2.3 The magical-realist presentation of historical reality by Chen Chieh-jen**

Contrasting to the above-mentioned visual mode, Chen’s *A Picture of Rebellion 1947-1998*, exhibited in the 2-28 Commemorative Exhibition in 1998, reveals a different dimension of cultural critique and stands out as the most unsettling one to me. The unsettling power, I think, lies in the ambiguity of the position the artist takes in relation to the historical, traumatic moment.



In this installation of *A Picture of Rebellion 1947-1998*, the artist arranged a huge computerized photographic image in the center of the hall, had four stone tablets hung on the walls, and placed recordings of muffled, whispering human voices behind the screen, as if the audience were to be situated in front of a hell-like historical scene. But upon coming closer to the screen and observing the image, viewers would soon realize that it is a phantasm kind of presentation because they are faced with a carnival-like play of sado-masochistic acts of self-destruction.



Chen's treatment of the "photographic image" is in sharp contrast to Kuo Bor-jou's usage of the old historical photographs in his *Appeal*. Kuo clearly intended to present the objective reportage function of the old photographs. Viewing old photographs, with faded images on them, the audience seems to be brought back to the points in time framed in the photographs. Chen also gave us "old photographs," but he did not provide us the narrative. Rather, he presented in front of us the vision of horror. The image tells us not the historical scene, but the hidden states of human mind and the related ideological apparatus in the scene of violence. Therefore, from the absurd and perversely hilarious expression on the faces of the figures in the photograph, the artist himself as the model, we actually read the artist's interpretation of the historical "truth," or certain forms of the extreme states of institutional violence that we face repeatedly in history.

### **3. Chen Chieh-jen's Historical Images: the revolt of the gaze**

#### **3.1 Chen Chieh-jen's project**

Chen Chieh-jen was born in 1960 in Taiwan, a member of the second generation of those who moved with KMT government from China to Taiwan in 1949. His *A Picture of Rebellion 1947-1998* is one of the series *Revolt in the Soul and Body*.<sup>11</sup> In one interview,<sup>12</sup> Chen explains that the purposes of his project of *Revolt in the Soul and Body* are twofold: The first half of the series is to present historical photographs taken from 1900 (a date the artist chose arbitrarily as the beginning of the modern era in China) until 1950 (the year in which martial law was declared in Taiwan),<sup>13</sup> and the second half is to present through fictional images the state of affairs affected by

the internalized violence.<sup>14</sup> Through these two sets of photographic images, Chen shows the cycle of violence and brutality, the rotation from the witnessed scenes of brutality to the imagined site of madness, from the role of the tortured to that of the torturer, and the path from the external act of violence to the internalized and institutionalized malice.

Let us look into some of his works and discuss his interpretation of this history of violence and horror. *Genealogy of Self, Being Castrated, Self-Destruction, Rule of Law*, and *Lost Voice* belong to his historical photographic images. In these images, though each is based on historical events and documentary photographs, the historical and documentary truth is drastically challenged and perverted, and the modifications clearly indicate the artist's play of the gaze.

### **3.2 Chen's play on the gaze of history**

Looking at Chen's photo-images adapted from historical documents, and examining the modifications he has done on the images, we would immediately notice the ironies in those historical moments the artist intends to present. The audience in *Genealogy of Self*, for example, apparently was attracted by the act of the torture and the people all turn their gaze upon the executioner's move, participating in the moment of the thrill. *Genealogy of Self* presents a scene in "Lingchi,"<sup>15</sup> based on the photograph used by Georges Bataille in his *Tears of Eros*.<sup>16</sup> The head of the victim--turned upward and gazing at the sky, dazed--brings us to the ambiguous juncture of extreme horror and erotic ecstasy discussed by Bataille. The anthropological and even tourist curiosity of the West about the Chinese execution, *les Supplices Chinois*, is most explicitly expressed by the series of postcards on which the images of the *Lingchi* were recorded and circulated among Westerners.<sup>17</sup> But the unreality of the

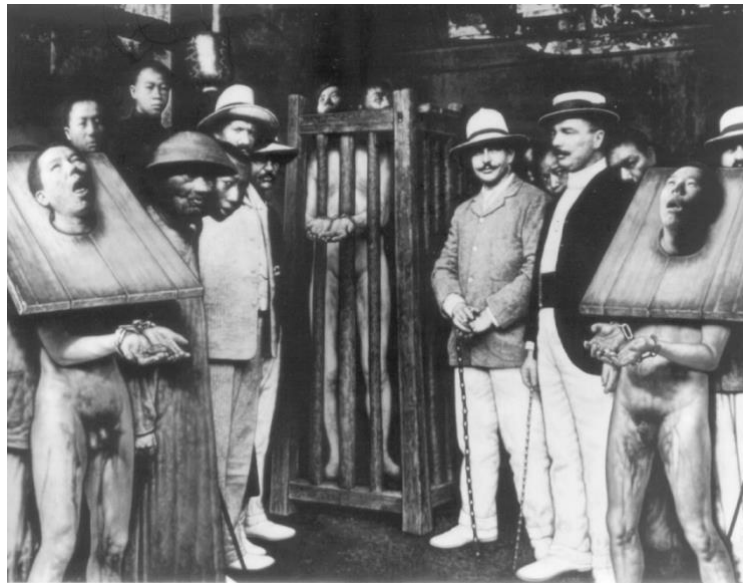
duplication of the victim's head in Chen's *Genealogy of Self* makes this gesture of horror and ecstasy into a incredulous question. Furthermore, Chen placed himself in the left-hand side of the background as one of the onlookers, and created a third dimension of the question concerning the moment of the early Chinese modernity in which the picture was taken. The irony in this photo therefore is mainly achieved through the play of the gaze: the internal gazes of the people within the frame of the original historical photos, the gaze employed by the camera and the apparatus involved with the power system, the modern gaze inserted by the artist through his own image, and the gaze from the wounds of the mutilated bodies that stare at the audience. The title *Genealogy of Self* further indicates the artist's belief the crime of *lingchi* and the roles of the torturer and that of the victim is repeated in humanity, or at least in the Chinese psyche.





*Being Castrated*, a continuity of the previous theme of lingchi but also a crude contrast to it, presents a scene in which all figures lined up, except the victims, posing in front of the camera, looking into the camera eye and inviting the viewer's gaze. This picture is based on a photograph taken around 1904-1910, a scene in the street of Shanghai, the photographer unknown. Chen added two figures--of himself--in the background watching the scene, and another two figures at both sides in the foreground--again he is the model--presenting the sufferers of the penalty of castration. These four figures serve as a frame of the spectacular scene. The "real" spectacular scene actually has been hidden in the back within the cage, and is now reproduced by Chen in an exaggerated form in the foreground, gazing at the audience. This gesture of implicit invitation of those people in the original photo, the foreign ambassadors, the executioners, and the onlookers, brings them all up to the same position, the one in which all participate in this ritual, as collaborators. But, the castrated organs of the two sufferers in the front gaze back at us, disrupting the circulation between the consumer's interests and the spectacular image. Chen also seems to suggest that the gaze caught in the photograph, responding to the photographer's camera-gaze, a Western instrument to record the moment of

exoticism, serves as a mirror reflection of the historical moment in which the West showed its greatest intrusive interest in China. The castration condition indicates the historical condition of China in the early twentieth century: a time of the foreign concessions forced upon China but also, paradoxically, of the launch of China's modernization.



The critique of the relation between Chinese modernization and Western institutional intrusion as revealed in the previous two photo-texts leads to Chen's real concern, that is, the institutional violence of the state exercised during the process of the modernization of the nation. The rest of the photo-texts in the series *Revolt in the Soul and Body* all point to this concern. *Self Destruction*, for example, indicates most directly the psychic aspect and the intra-ethnic malice in the scene of state violence. The artist juxtaposed two historical photographs in this picture, the right-hand part of this picture using Jay Calvin Huston's photo taken in 1927 during the qingdang (liquidating the [Communist] party) period, a scene in which Chiang Kai-shek's

soldiers KMT slaughtered Communists in Canton (Guangzhou), and the left-hand part using a photo in around 1928 in the street of Dongbei, also a scene in the liquidation period, the photographer unknown. The theme of the self-destructive violence is clearly exposed through the twin figures in the center, fiercely but happily killing each other. Again, Chen placed his images in the twin figure in the center, as the falling head in the foreground, and as one of the spectators in the background. Chen seems to suggest that the KMT's liquidating the Communist members is an act of abjection, in Kristeva's sense, throwing off and cleansing away the bad part in oneself and consequently destroying himself.



The trilogy of *Lost Voice* reaches at the pinnacle of the display of extreme horror of the violence of the state. These pictures are based on a photo taken in 1946, during the Civil War period, when the Communist armies took Chongli, 90 miles north of Zhang Jia Kou, and slaughtered the whole village.<sup>18</sup> The lumps of corpses appear already like a scene in hell. The ecstasy displayed on the face of the self-masturbating and auto-mutilating figures, Chen as the models, dancing on the lumps of corpses, in transport of joy, looking back at us, pushes the painful scene to the extreme. The



accumulation of the act of violence in the path to build the new nation obtained its most representative symbolic form.<sup>19</sup>



We have to view these pictures as an epic in the negative mode, an epic not of heroes or victories, but of the fate of China in the first half of the twentieth century. It is also an epic of the happenings of the perverse human psyche in the path of state modernization. All the acts of violence and battles are linked with the histories of exclusion, the residues and vicissitudes of *les supplices Chinois*. Through these historical photo-texts, the histories of Chinese penalties and systems of exclusion, all re-emerge in front of the audience, but in a very ambiguous and phantasmal way. This is an archeology of the institutional violence in the course of the state modernization. The recurrence of the double motif in all these pictures and the artist's own image-signatures on the photos seem to further suggest Chen's interpretation of the splitting of the human psyche, or the Chinese-Taiwanese condition, and the ambiguity of the subject position in these acts of violence. The gaze Chen inserts into these photo-images revolts against the ideologically regulating, organizing and dominating gaze, a mode of the gaze determined by the orthodox discourse of the history. It is a gaze that

questions and revolts against the institutionalized account of reality.

The questions Chen formed through his photographic images, either intentionally or unintentionally, can be phrased as follows: **First, about the gaze: Who has the right to record or recount the past, and with what instrument or apparatus? Who was looking at the pictures through the camera eye and dominated the power relations? What is the viewing position that has been determined by the camera/power-system? How do we interpret the ambiguity in the relations between the gazing subject and the gazed object, between the photographer and the photographed, between the executioners/the onlookers/the official-accomplice and the victim, and between the audience and the artwork? Another set of questions also could be asked: How do we read history? Can we resist the gaze determined by the state ideological apparatus? Can we uncover the surface of images and see the genealogy and the inherent connectedness not only within all the massacres in history but also within the institutionalized violence?**

Moving from Chen's historically based photo-texts to his even more fantastic computerized-photographic images, the aftermath of the scene of violence, we seem to witness a bottomless descent from the furious ecstasy. Chen said that this group of pictures reflects the unseen and institutionalized violence during the martial law period in Taiwan, the point of history in which Chen was placed. The allegorical references behind these images--be it the headless god of the wasteland era (*Image of an Absent Mind*), the juxtaposed moment of destruction and rebirth (*The Image of Identical Twins*), the institutional dominion over the juvenile prisoners (*Na-Cha's Body*), or the marriage/funeral procession toward the city of insane (*A Way Going to an Insane City*)--are not important. I believe we see no more play of the gaze within

the frame, but only blinded and mutilated figures. The ecstatic moments of execution and massacre are gone; what is left behind is the wasteland-like condition, a condition of melancholy and despair. This second group of pictures add a different dimension of meaning to the first group that we discussed: These pictures are the mirror reflections of his contemporary time, while the first group was only the “pre-history,” the history excluded and silenced through the institutional apparatus of state power.



### 3.3 A gaze at the obscene real

Chen’s artworks display aspects of Chinese folk beliefs about hell and the human soul. Chen has said that pictures of hell have fascinated him since he was a child. He has collected various versions of the pictures of hell, and even drew them himself. In the series of the *Revolt of Body and Soul*, he said that his method of construction is comparable to the concept of *nie-jing* in the Chinese “inferno.” In the inferno,

according to Chinese folk belief, there is the *nie-jing*, a mirror that the underworld judge would ask the dead to look into. The dead could see in the mirror his past behaviors and desires; nothing could escape from this reflection. Working on the images from the historical past, Chen said that he felt all his past lives have come back to him and collided within him. He also said that he tried to explore the conditions of separate spirit egos, according to the Chinese Taoist understanding of the human soul, simultaneously existing in one person. That is why he placed several “I’s” in the frames of his photographic image.

The folkloric perception of the mirror in hell and the existence of several spirit egos are significant to our understanding of Chen’s interpretation of history. About history, Chen said, “I tried to convey and present the suppressed and invisible images through my work. [...] The histories I am much concerned about are the histories excluded by orthodox power, that is, the histories outside history. Moreover, I’m even more concerned about the histories survived in the realm of ecstasy, like the lacunae among the words, concealed in the midst of aphasia, infiltrated into our language, body, desire and smell” (“About the Forms of My Works”).

About the method of his production, Chen said,

I put these vague historical photographic images into computer, and enlarged them on a very large scale. On the screen these enlarged images seemed like the historical vestige scattered in the mist.

Indistinct images, some vague faces, some pieces of dismembered bodies, some broken traces, with floating scents drifting in the mist.

Who were they? When I intrude myself into the boundless space of image-specters, and tried to paint their faces according to my

imagination, every stroke of my pen seemed to betray their original faces. These faces that I have painted seemed more like the masks, bearing the brand of my own face, the face of the Other. But, who is the real Other? As I painted the historical images, I also fused my body image and my body memories into the mist of images. (“About the Forms of My Works”) 20

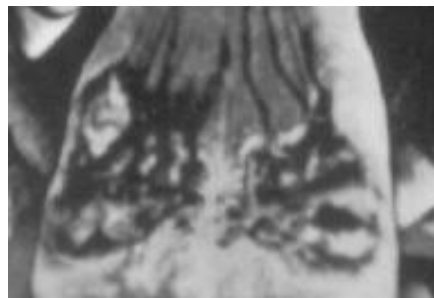
Chen also said that he wanted to “gaze” (ningshi) into the images so that he could “penetrate” them:

I could not help but gazing at these photographic images of anonymous people being tortured and executed. It seemed that behind these images you could uncover another layer of image and unspoken hidden words. It seemed that there was another face emerging from each of the vague, faint faces, another shaking, unfixed body emerging from and overlapping on the fixed body. [...] As I gazed at these historical photographic images, I found that the past looked back on me. (“About the Forms of My Works”)

The “gaze” Chen tries to explain is apparently not the “gaze” in which, according to Norman Bryson, the vanishing point in the Albertian space gazes back and determined the spectator’s position of viewing, not only in terms of perspective, but also in terms of ideology (“The Gaze and the Glance” 102-11). Nor is it the Lacanian gaze with which the image-screen, inscribed with the code of the symbolic, hints at the viewer’s lack.<sup>21</sup> That is, Chen’s images are not the fetishized phallus, *Objet Petit*

a, which screens away the real scene of trauma, as what we could find in the series of 2-28 Commemorative Exhibitions designed by the Taipei Fine Art Museum. His images are the displacement of the trauma. The artist intentionally presents in front of us, through horrifying and ugly images of reality, the real that escapes us in our daily lives.

Pinpointing the historical references or the local systems of folk beliefs that function in Chen's construction of images, as I have done in the previous sections, can help us understand part of his images, but only partly. This hidden reality he presented in front of us is apparently not only the history that has been erased by the government or the hell-like conditions of political strife. Why does Chen say that the histories are survived "in the realm of ecstasy," and "infiltrated into our language, body, desire and smell"? After surveying the pictures and analyzing the irony of history or the malice of the homicide, what would again attract our gaze, or rather Chen's gaze, are the open wounds on the tortured bodies in Lingchi, the sliced open breasts, the cut knees, the castrated organs, the torn-out eyes, and the chopped-off heads.



The gap on the body looks back at us and, like the "punctum" described by Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida*, "rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me" (26). But, the traumatic point presented by Chen is not the Barthesian

“punctum” either, because, for Barthes, the punctum is what might escape people’s gaze, what is already there but has to be added by the viewer, and this traumatic point is “acute yet muffled, it cries out in silence” (53). Chen’s traumatic scene is acute and loud; it is the image of the castrated self, of the wound, and of the torturing gestures. Chen’s gaze revolts against the ideologically organizing and dominating gaze, a mode of the gaze determined by orthodox history. It is a gaze that questions and revolts against our understanding of reality. Through looking into the mutilated and castrated, we see the absent, the excluded and the effaced, that is, we are faced with the un-sublimated performance of the obscene real, violence and destruction, undecorated and nude. But, again, this undecorated and nude aspect of the real is not an abstract or universal humanity, but the real that has been inscribed by history. We’ll come back to this issue later.

#### **4. The State of Bardo: the lining of the visible reality**

##### **4.1 Violence of the Oedipal rebellion versus perversion and melancholy**

Works by Chen’s contemporaries occasionally give a surrealist or magical-realist presentation of scenes of violence, but in very different mode. In *A Symptom of the World’s End* (1986) and *Wounded Funeral* (1993) by Wu Tian-chang (1956-), or in *The Scene of Killed Kun* (1986) and *Made in Taiwan* (1991) by Yang Mao-ling (1953-), or in Xingtian pieces (1991, 1993) by Hou Chun-ming, we see a certain pattern of violence, the violence in the act of fierce protest and accusation.



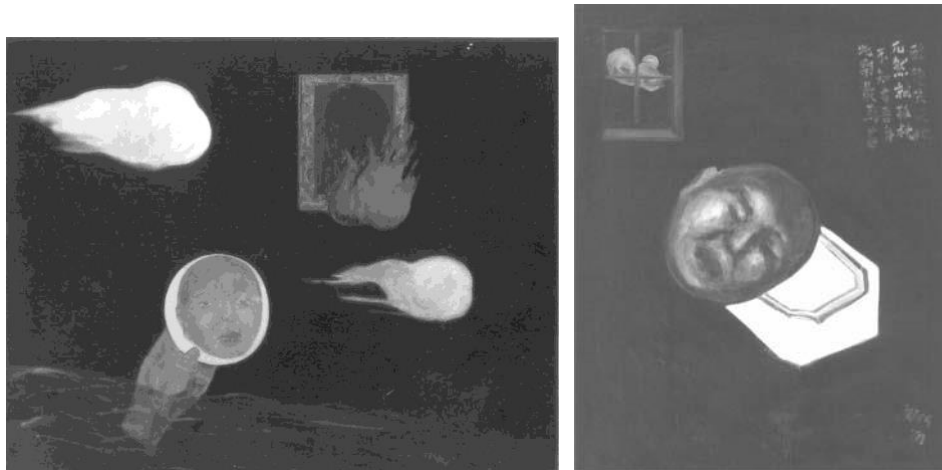
The violence in the act of protest exerts the Oedipal rebellious gesture attacking the paternal law while provoking punishment. This dynamic of violence could be found especially in the few years before and after the lifting of martial law, from around the mid-1980s toward the mid-1990s, an echo of the Kaohsiung Incident in 1979, but more in a rebellious symbolic gesture.





“The ‘Kaohsiung Incident’ of 1979,” <http://www.taiwandc.org/history.htm>.

Chen’s mode of violence is different from this Oedipal rebellion because, instead of the juvenile revolt, his works expose rather the performance of an infantile perversion of the intermingled sadistic and masochistic subject positions in jouissance, followed by melancholy, a melancholy that is self-evacuating and non-objectal. Zheng Zaidong’s severed head on canvas, for example, *The Burning Memories* (1994) and *Drinking Alone Under the Moon III* (1998), or his *Cloth-Like Clear River* (1998), represent the most typical example of such self-evacuating and non-objectal melancholy.<sup>22</sup> It is violence toward oneself.



The violence that is directed toward oneself cuts off the semiotic referential function in the representation. It is the violence that is aroused when the loved object, which has been transplanted in oneself, is dead, and when the cosmic system collapsed along with the death of the loved object. This melancholy happens when the god-like paternal figure is beheaded and the era of firm faith is gone.<sup>23</sup> What artists do, in the words of Hal Foster, is either attack the image-screen or probe behind the image-screen “for the obscene object-gaze of the real” (156): “on the one hand an ecstasy in the imagined breakdown of the image-screen and/or the symbolic order; on the other hand a horror at this fantasmatic event followed by a despair about it” (165).

Chen's photographic images led us to experience these later stages of horror and of despair described by Foster.

#### **4.2 The lining of visible reality: the abjection and the abject**

Regarding the *Ritual in the Fin de Siècle: Contemporary Taiwanese Art* exhibition held in 1999 in New York,<sup>24</sup> Huang Chinho, a contemporary Taiwanese artist, remarked: "the current state of Taiwan is one of fearfulness, anxiousness, and uncertainty. This can be likened to the state of bardo (zhongyin) described in Buddhism, a state that is also reflected in contemporary Taiwanese art" (quoted in Chang 9). The literal translation of bardo is "between" (bar) "two" (do). It is also translated as "intermediate shadow," a state between death and rebirth. Chang Fangwei, the curator of this exhibition, pointed out that this concept of bardo suggests "vitality" in the transitional stage of Taiwanese society, "a leap from the state of death to that of rebirth" (9-11). To me, Chang's interpretation of the bardo state, of the "transition" and the "leap," however, is too optimistic and automatic. What is significant in the state of bardo in Chen's work, if we take it metaphorically, is the in-between-ness of various states of consciousness. Looking at Chen's images of horror and fear, we are face to face with the lining of the human condition, separation, exclusion and violence, through which the past moments return, and the reality behind the moments of trauma and castration are also revealed.

Bataille discussed the problem of our fear at the scene of violence and sacrifice. Auto-mutilation or sacrifice in its essential phase, Bataille explained, would be "the rejection of what had been appropriated by a person or by a group" ("Sacrificial Mutilation," 70). Similarly, the repugnance we experience in face of such images of the sacrifice, in Bataille's words, is "only one of the forms of stupor caused by a

horrifying eruption, by the disgorging of a force that threatens to consume” (“Sacrificial Mutilation,” 70). In a different work, Bataille said, looking at the photographic images of a Chinese man being tortured, he felt fascinated and repulsed at the same time: “as if I had wanted to stare at the sun, my eyes rebel.” Bataille said that he loved the young and seductive Chinese man, not with the love of sadistic instinct, but through the excessive nature of his pain, through his own seeking “to ruin in me that which is opposed to ruin” (*Inner Experience*, 120, 123). The love-fear ambivalence in the feelings toward ruin and destruction, and toward self-abandonment in ecstasy, is central to Bataille’s interpretation of the link between religious ecstasy and extreme horror.

Julia Kristeva clarified the mystical element in our ambivalence toward the fascinating and yet repulsive images of the violated and ugly bodies through her theories of the “abjection.” Kristeva said that an artist at boundary positions goes through abjection, “whose intimate side is suffering and horror its public feature” (*Powers of Horror*, 140). The abject is the filthy and bad parts that the body/culture/history wants to cleanse away. It is not the lack of cleanliness that causes abjection, but “what disturbs identity, system, order; what does not respect borders, positions, and rules; the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4). We could not tolerate the ambiguous within us, the violence, the terror, the madness, in the same way that culture executes its purgation. Sliced-open corpses, torn-out eyes, and severed limbs, are the extreme abject conditions that we fear to face. Through art, or through language, we see the artist’s “sublimation of abjection” in the scenes of violence, madness and *jouissance*, through the process of working-out and working-through” (*Powers of Horror*, 26). Going through or experiencing the process of the sublimation of abjection, we come to realize what had been suppressed or excluded

within us. Both Bataille and Kristeva had answered to the questions of the ambivalent relations between our gaze at the scenes of horror and our bodily memories.

Chen offered similar and yet very different explanations about penalty and the mutilation of the bodies. About penalty, Chen said,

Penalty is a ritual of the embodiment of the structure of exclusion. In the entanglement of the torturer and the tortured, the spectator's gaze intervenes, and the penalty thereby infiltrates into the gaze. The gaze brings the ritual of penalty to a real climax that makes the subsequent extension of emotional effect possible.

During the ritual of penalty, what did the victims think at the agonizing moment of suffering and death? What kind of transmutations happened in the spectator's thinking while he gazes at the execution? How earnest was the executioner in his obsession with the techniques of execution? How did they develop this highly delicate techniques and manipulations of execution to extend the duration of the victim's agony, and the spectator's gaze? Why are the spectators, and we, bewitched by the techniques of this management? I wonder whether the victims painstakingly exposed their intention of committing the patricide by means of the transgression against the law, and I also wonder why the invisible but ubiquitous father can't escape his tragic destiny to kill his sons in fury, suspicion and phobia.

Is it possible to find the map of their thinking and emotions from their faces or bodies? And, will this map be inscribed once again on the bodies of the spectators?

---From "About the Forms of My Works"

Chen said that his presentation of the images of penalty has nothing to do with "redemption." For him, the process of his works of art is "a kind of voyage between turbidity and a sudden realization." The extremity of torture and dismemberment, he added, serves as the bridge between the turbidity and the sudden realization, "the rupture and rebirth by which we pass through the fear in the mind." "Cruelty always obstructs the spectators from looking into the photographic images." Nevertheless, Chen asked, "is the dark abyss of wounds not the very crack that we need to pass through so as to arrive at the self-abandonment?" (*About the Forms of my Works*). This self-abandonment, the renunciation of the subject-hood, similar to the state in trance or of ecstasy, helps one to move in-between inter-subjective positions, with a subjectivity and non-identity. Chen asked: Are we not inscribed in our body the past histories, past experience, and past visions? To me, it is not a version of the Buddhist concept of reincarnation, but the artist's interpretation of our existence infiltrated by historical moments and experience. Chen's magical and historical images fully expose the memories, both of the Chinese histories in the first half of the twentieth century, and of his own individual history and his childhood. These two dimensions, the collective and the individual, collide upon his photographic visions. What is more important, to me, is that his images hint at a special mode of the gaze: the gaze of Revolt, the gaze that leads us to question the flat explanation of our history, and to penetrate into the complex infrastructure of our past, to retrieve our memories and to work through our problems.

## 5. The Gaze of Revolt: Taiwan conditions reinterpreted

What Chen has interpreted through his photo-texts reveals a typical Taiwan condition. Taiwanese people have not seen war or public massacre since 1950. People under 50 grew up in a world of peace and stability. The bloody scenes of the massacre executed by the KMT troops in the February 28 Incident had been hushed up and suppressed and was banned from all forms of discussion and history books. The martial law period is a state of vacuum that people's knowledge of history has been white-washed, and they do not see and do not know anything heterogeneous against the system of the state. This state of white-washed control explains why Chen remarked, "Through the process of modernization, history has been *lingchi*-ed, that is, chopped and severed as human bodies." Underneath the surface of stability and peace, there are various transformations of intra-ethnic hostilities and secret types of political persecutions during the White Terror period: people disappeared and did not return. But people do not see it. Therefore, Chen also remarked, "The martial law period does not mean public persecution, but the condition that nothing real could be seen or heard." ("Interview") Through gazing into the images of historical trauma and the the damaged bodies, Chen seems to prick through the balloon and suggest that we can see the connectedness of layers and layers of histories before us through these holes on the bodies.

To move further into the issues regarding what is the historically inscribed "real" and what has been worked through in Chen's photo-texts, we need to enter Chen's personal life. Chen grew up in Xindian (Hsin-tien) near the the Martial Court and Martial Prison, where political prisoners were interrogated and put on trial, including the ones arrested in the Kaohsiung Incident of 1979. Chen said that what had been

kept in prison pricked his curiosity ever since he was a child. His father is one of those veterans who came with Chiang Kai-shek's troops to Taiwan in 1949. All the men in his village were like his father and had suffered through wars, came alone with the army to the island, leaving their families behind on the mainland, too poor to have a proper marriage in Taiwan and therefore married poor orphans, Aborigines, or handicapped persons. Chen said that the queer thing about his village was that many families, including his own, had retarded children. Chen's brother was not only retarded but also paralyzed, lying on the bed naked throughout the years until his death at 13 or 14 years old. Chen shared the same room with this retarded younger brother, lived with him, and watched his death.

To Chen, the images of the retarded and the dead are his daily childhood perceptual experience. The tall wall of the Martial Court that blocked his eyesight is also his daily perceptual experience. But these images of the wounded bodies in a sense are the channels that link to the history he was placed in: his being born in the veteran's village, growing up during martial law, living in the neighborhood of the Martial Court, as a son of the veteran, with a quiet and hard-working mother, a disabled brother, and so on. The images Chen Chieh-Jen presents in front of us in his *Revolt in Body and Soul* series could be seen as the images of what he sees on or through the walls of the Martial Court. But through the recurring images of the truncated bodies we also see Chen's impulse to cut and separate the part of his moron brother or the memories of him from himself. This recurrence of the act highlights the fundamental mode of fascination in Chen's process of artistic work.

Chen described his method of synchronization of images, fusing the image of his body with the images of the past, as a state of trance, as if facing the mirror in hell,



with flashbacks of karma. He said, “For me, it is the re-emergence of the suppressed, repressed, and canceled memories.” We finally come to realize that Chen’s gaze of revolt is the gaze at the nude and obscene horror, through which the suppressed and repressed memories of the last generations return, painful and disgraceful memories that his parents’ generation would not like to and do not know how to talk about. Starting from the dismembered memories and truncated understanding, he takes his audience back to the “lingchi-ed” history and the moments and sites of the variations of the lingchi. Looking into the lining of the visible surface, the extreme state of horror, Chen has disrupted the objective gaze, the gaze from the state, and he has also eroded the subject-object binary relation through the objective gaze. He takes people to look at the wounds with blood and the chopped-open corpses, repulsive and sickening images that people tend to avoid. In facing such abject images, we also face the fragility and fluidity not only between life and death, but also between violence and joy, between sadistic and masochistic pleasures, and between the repetitions of historical violence. We learn to face the fact that more was silenced than the February 28 Incident and the persecutions under the White Terror, though these are still a black hole in most Taiwanese people’s consciousness. What had also been silenced are the crimes the Chinese did to themselves during the first half of the twentieth century. The retarded and handicapped figures in Chen’s later wasteland images, moreover, speak of the artist’s repeated childhood perception of his village, and metaphorically also of the historically conditioned and trapped space and time he has been situated in.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The Republic of China's seat in the United Nation was taken over by People's Republic of China in 1971. In December 1978 United States switched its recognition from the Republic of China to the People's Republic of China. These two events brought great impact on Taiwanese society. Thomas Gold has rightly observed that, "a quest for a unique Taiwan identity began in the mid-1970's and gathered steam with Taiwan's increased diplomatic isolation and the rise of the tangwai" (61).

<sup>2</sup> In the Kaohsiung Incident of 1979, Kuomintang's military and police broke up the island's first major Human Rights Day celebration (10 December 1979), and subsequently arrested and imprisoned virtually all leading members of Taiwan's budding democratic movement. One of the major issues in the Formosa Magazine, the organizer for the Human Rights Day Celebration, was to disclose the historical tragedy of the February Twenty-Eighth in 1947, which had been suppressed immediately after the Erection of Martial Law in 1950. The Kuomintang government of course could not tolerate such riot and instability. The tortures these people suffered during the imprisonment, non-stop interrogations, beatings, punching, cigarettes scorching, were severe. The most gruesome part of the incident was that the mother and two kids of Lin Yi-hsung, a former Provincial Assembly-member who was arrested in the incident, were murdered on the twenty-eighth of February in the following year, and the case has not been solved till today. The Kaohsiung Incident galvanized most people's political conscience, some along with the incident, some gradually in the following years. In September 1986, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) was formed and became a full-fledged opposition party. For a brief introduction to the background of these political events and social changes, please consult Yang Bi-chuan's Taiwan Lishi Cidian (Dictionary of Taiwan History), or "The 'Kaohsiung Incident' of 1979: A turning point in Taiwan's history. <http://www.taiwandc.org/history.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Gold commented that in 1990's, after the lifting of the Martial Law, "defining Taiwanese identity is still a process at the stage of rediscovering a history comprised of a diverse array of components, but it has become a conscious project" (64).

<sup>4</sup> The debates among Taiwanese art critics on "the local" and "the Western" occurred during 1991 to 1993. This wave of debates was initiated by Ni Zaiqin's "Western Art, Made in Taiwan: A Critique on Modern Taiwan Art." It was followed by a series of debates from all sides, accumulating twenty-five essays. Reviewing the arguments involved in the debate, we see clear repetition of debate held by the nativist "Xiangtu" movement against the modernist literature in 1970s. Please consult Taiwan Meishu zhong de Taiwan Yishi (The Taiwanese Consciousness in Taiwan Art: Anthology of the Essays on the Taiwanese Art Debates in early 1990s.) Cf. articles by Ni Zaiqin, Guo Shaozong, Liu Wensan, Lin Xingyue, collected in Taiwan Meishu zhong de Taiwan Yishi.

<sup>5</sup> Julia Kristeva discussed about the "culture of revolt" in The Sense and Nonsense of Revolt. For Kristeva, the "culture of revolt" has the ability to resist the normalizing powers of regulation and punishment. This regulation, though neither totalitarianism nor fascism, represents the invisible power surrounding us, from fundamentalism, nationalism, to nonpunitive legislation, delaying tactics, media theatricalization, and so on. (The Sense and Nonsense of Revolt 4-9) Kristeva continues to explain her use of "revolt" that it is not in the sense of transgression but to describe the process of the analysand's retrieving his memory and beginning his work of anamnesis with the analyst." (28)

<sup>6</sup> Please consult, for example, 228 Shijian Wenxian Jilu (Compilation of the 228 Incident Documents), 228 Xueshu Lunwen Ji (Proceedings of the 228 Conference), or <http://www.t228.gov.tw>; <http://www.taiwandc.org/228-intr.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> These leaders helped the people to protest against the corrupt government that took over Taiwan after the end of World War II when it retreated from China. The arrest of a woman who sold cigarette without a license on February 28 of 1947 incited the anger of the people

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and the public protests soon rose up out of control. Chiang Kai-shek's troops arrived shortly and started forced suppression and massive execution throughout the island. Countless people were murdered, and many others kept in prison till the beginning of 1980s.

<sup>8</sup> Following the Lifting of the Martial Law, the government first expressed the official condolence in 1990, and established the 228 Memorial Monument in 1993.

<sup>9</sup> Even though local scholars and art critics curate the 2-28 exhibitions in 1998 and 1999, unlike the previous two exhibitions that were designed by the officials, we see the same impulses in the art works to narrate historical scenes.

<sup>10</sup> For the reactions to these exhibitions, please consult Xie Li-Fa, "On the Role of the 2.28 Incident in Taiwan Art History," 38-43; Huang Bao-ping, "We do not see the Sadness, How do we talk about Sublimation—on TFAM's 2.28 Exhibition" 309-311; and the special issue on the 2.28 Exhibitions, Xiandai Meishu (Modern Art). 70 (1997.2).

<sup>11</sup> Chen Chieh-Jen's Revolt in the Soul & Bdoy series has been invited to various international exhibitions, such as the 48<sup>th</sup> Biennale di Venezia (Taiwan Pavilion) in 1999 in Venice; the International Photography Biennale, Centro de la Imagen, in México in 1999; Man & Space: Art & Human Rights, Kwangju Biennale 2000, Kwangju; the 5<sup>th</sup> Biennale de Lyon Contemporary Art, Sharing Exoticisms, in Lyon in 2000; New Identity 4 – Digital Edge, Mitsubishi-Jisho ARTIUM, Fukuoka, 2000; The Mind of the Edge, Photo España, Circulo de Bellas Artes, Madrid, in 2000; the 31<sup>st</sup> Rencontres Internationales de la Potographie, Abbaye de Montmajour, Arles, 2000; Performance Art in NRW 2000, Düsseldorf, Essen, Köln, Münster. A Polish magazine Max has also published his works in 1999, Number 6, in Warsaw.

<sup>12</sup> Excepted indicated otherwise, Chen Chieh-Jen's opinions on his work quoted in this paper are based on the two interviews I had with Chen respectively in the twenty-eighth of July and the eleventh of August in 2000.

<sup>13</sup> Genealogy of Self (1996), Being Castrated (1996), Self-Destruction (1996), Rule of Law series (1997), Lost Voice series (1997)

<sup>14</sup> Image of An Absent Mind (1998), The Image of Identical Twins (1998), Na-Cha's Body (1998), and A Way Going to An Insane City (1999)

<sup>15</sup> Lingchi, the slow torture by slicing the parts of the body, the cruelest means of torture employed through thousands of years in China, was not abolished until 1905. Some record stated that the victim should not die before he suffered more than thousand slices, otherwise the executioner would be put to death. Normally a crowd would gather at the site of execution so that they could obtain the blood and flesh for medicinal use. Please consult Wang Yongkuan's Zhongguo Gudai Kuxing (Ancient Tortures in China).

<sup>16</sup> According to Bataille, this picture was first published by Dumas in Traité de psychologie, Paris, 1923, and Carpeaux in Pékin qui s'en va, Paris, 1913. Bataille owned this picture since 1925, given to him by Dr. Borel. Bataille said that this photograph had a decisive role in his life. He had been obsessed by that image of pain, at once ecstatic and intolerable. For him, the identity of the contraries, divine ecstasy and extreme horror, leads to his conclusion to his study of eroticism. Tears of Eros, 204-207.

<sup>17</sup> The series of postcard was entitled as "Les Supplices Chinois." This one was mailed in July the 9<sup>th</sup> of 1912, from Tien-tsin, to France. This postcard is taken from a collection of old postcards edited by Fang Ling, Shou Xiang, Bei Ning. Jiumeng Chongjing, Guangxi Arts Publishing, 1998.

<sup>18</sup> According to the Central News Agency, the photograph (#2100) was taken around the December of 1946, in the battle at Chong Li. In the Chronicles of China: 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the record shows that this battle took place in the ninth of November, 1946, when the Communist Armies occupies Chong Li, northern to Zhang Jia Kou, and killed several thousands of civilians. But Chen Chieh-Jen said that the filing system of the Central News Agency might be wrong because when he first looked at this picture, before they started their filing program, it was located among a group of pictures taken after Chiang Kai-shek's armies took Yan-an when the Communists deserted the place during the Civil War.

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<sup>19</sup> According to the Chronicles of China: 20th Century, the number of the death of Chiang Kai-shek's troops in one battle could reach up to 100000, for example, respectively in the battles at Jinzhong and at Jinan, 1948. There are numerous battles like this from 1946 to 1949.

<sup>20</sup> Chen Chieh-Jen's own statement, "About the Forms of My Works," appears at the website: [http://www.asa.de/Perf\\_konf/Reader2/Reader2-1.htm#ChenAbout](http://www.asa.de/Perf_konf/Reader2/Reader2-1.htm#ChenAbout)

<sup>21</sup> Please consult Lacan's "Of the Gaze as Objet Petit a."

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Yang Ze's article in the Collection of Zheng Zai-Dong's Works.

<sup>23</sup> Kristeva offered very thorough discussion about this age of melancholy in her Black Sun, 8-53.

<sup>24</sup> In this exhibition, Hung Tung, Chen Chieh-jen, Huang Chinho, Lee Mingtse, Wu Tienchang, Chen Chienpei and Tsai Hairu were selected.