

Secession Chen Chieh-jen

5 Worn Away. Motivation and Methodology, Chen Chieh-jen

76 Speciation Beyond Species: Chen Chieh-jen and the Possibility of a Compassionate Exit from the Militarization of Life, Jon Solomon

It is impossible to predict at exactly what point the technological singularity will emerge, but in substance, we are already living in an empire constructed by a corporatocracy of transnational financial conglomerates, military industrial complexes, and digital and biotech giants. Through the global Internet, the empire manipulates how the vast majority perceives the world, and the common people, influenced by pervasive control technology, are led into various spaces of disorientation while almost all dissenting voices are marginalized.

At this juncture, the authenticity of countless events has become increasingly difficult to determine. This leads one to consider the difference between Western and Eastern perspectives on illusion. To facilitate the distinction and for ease of expression, the Sanskrit term *māyā* can be used for the Eastern perspective, which is primarily from Buddhism.

In Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*, the distinction between mere shadows and reality is absolute, and these two elements, illusion and reality, are set in opposition. In Buddhism, however, *māyā* (or illusory appearances) refers to the fact that everything in the universe is in a state of constant flux, that nothing possesses an absolute essence, and that nothing is forever immutable. This applies to each and every thing and explains the basis for matter coming together to form objects, which exist for a time and then decay and disappear. A core concern of the Buddha in putting forward this thesis was to break the caste system constructed by the Brahmin class and supported by a sweeping mythological narrative. In other words, the Buddha, in pointing out that nothing has an absolute and unchanging essence, made it clear that all living beings, including all species, are equal, and no distinctions can be made concerning blood, race, or culture.

Currently, however, following the empire's successful establishment of illusory neoliberalism in most countries and regions, new caste systems have already taken shape in many societies. Take the income disparity between the rich and poor, for example: as of 2018, the wealth owned by the world's top twenty-six richest individuals is equal to the wealth owned by the poorer half of the global population, or 3.8 billion people.¹ During the pandemic, heavy reliance on the Internet exacerbated this wealth gap,² and simultaneously, under the enormous pressures caused by accelerationism and the subsequent fight for survival, the incidence of mental illness increased by twenty-five percent in 2020 alone, according to a report published by the World Health Organization, thereby increasing the number of people suffering from mental illness to nearly one billion.³

The creation of this new caste system must involve an enormous transformation process, the core of which is the non-stop generation of new illusions that lure each new generation into the space of disorientation established by the empire.

Invoking the Buddhist concept of *māyā* in this era serves as a means of deconstructing new illusions: that is, it offers an alternative future

perspective that posits the equality of all beings while deconstructing the empire's view that normalizes the new caste system. This can also be applied to cultural and artistic production, which has the potential to point out various paths to equality, regardless of what form the production takes and whether its content is based in realism or fiction.

Images have always been central to the idea of illusion, and this is even more so the case recently due to developments in AI, which now has the ability to quickly generate images whose authenticity is impossible to determine. Three examples from history will be cited to support the perspective that images are not only about how they are recorded and produced by devices.

Example One: Bianwen and Sujiang Monks

Bianwen is a Tang Dynasty (618 – 907) literary form that evolved along with the spread of Buddhism from India to China. To facilitate understanding of esoteric sutras, Sujiang Monks transformed them into vernacular stories and then performed the stories for the common people. Transcriptions of these performances are called *bianwen*. By interpreting, translating, and rewriting scripture, Sujiang Monks were similar to modern-day performance artists who construct discursive fields. But to place these historical figures in contemporary society would be to re-imagine or redefine their significance, as they would no longer be interpreters, translators, and rewriters of canonical theory, but rather more like deconstructionists chasing away the sorcery and illusions employed in the complex new control project undertaken by the empire, or like those who prompt everyone to imagine a different future.

Example Two: Lo-deh Sao

The origins of *lo-deh sao* are unclear, but it most likely began in the pre-industrial era, when farmers would sweep clean a spot in the village, perhaps under a tree, and perform simple operas during the fallow season. This form of cultural production organized for the amusement of the villagers was called *lo-deh sao*, meaning “to sweep the ground.” *Lo-deh sao* still has the power to inspire us today. By organizing this entertainment, farmers also became amateur performers taking on the identities of mythical figures or portraying characters of the opposite sex. Not only were they creating art during these performances, but more importantly, they were afforded an opportunity to transcend their identities; it might be said that the multiple identities of farmer, performer (artist), and mythical figure converged in one individual. Furthermore, in China's history, these local self-organized theater performances often became vehicles for peasant uprisings.

Example Three: Bitai Thoan

During the Japanese colonial period (1895 – 1945), Chiang Wei-shui established the Taiwanese Cultural Association, which operated from 1921 to 1927. The association formed a traveling team of projectionists and silent film narrators known as Bitai Thoan in 1926. At the time it was common for Japanese police officers or firefighters to be seated in the last row of theaters run by local Taiwanese. Their purpose was to monitor film narrators and prevent them from advancing anti-colonial sentiment. These same narrators, however, would use Taiwanese dialect, slang, or sayings that only the local audience understood to deliberately create anti-colonial meaning in films where it had not existed before. The audience would laugh, applaud, cheer, and gesture when they heard these deliberately twisted interpretations.

The interaction between Bitai Thoan silent film narrators and their audience was a dialogic performance that both relied on images and went beyond them. This was especially so when the Japanese monitors left their seats overlooking the theater and stepped between the narrators and the audience to halt the interaction. At that point, the colonizers not only became visible to, and were encircled by, the audience, but also suddenly became the monitored under the gaze of the local people. Whether the Japanese police successfully thwarted interaction is less important than the fact that each was forced into a dual role of colonial oppressor and subject of scrutiny. The theater space intended for presenting films became the site of a role reversal between the monitor and the monitored, as well as a site where sound, image, dialog, theater, and cultural action came together to create a complex dialogical art field.

Following these connections, we might imagine that those audience members charged with subjective agency would, based on their own interpretations, retranslate, reimagine, and renarrate a film originally intended as colonial propaganda. And through the process of continuous retelling, they might have generated countless anti-colonial *yaoyan* films.⁴

The reason for focusing on these three examples is to suggest that, in this time when we are all subject to the empire's pervasive control technology, contemporary video artists can first of all follow the example of the Sujiang Monks and deconstruct the sorcery and illusions that the empire employs. The practice of film production can also be like organizing *lo-deh sao*; laborers eliminated by automation, temporary contract workers controlled by algorithms, immaterial labor that is being replaced by AI, and those with dissenting opinions who have been forced to the margins can all gather together and construct a platform where they can create scenes, become performers, and make their voices heard. In this way, professional and amateur members of the video production team can continually interact. The videos they produce should fall somewhere

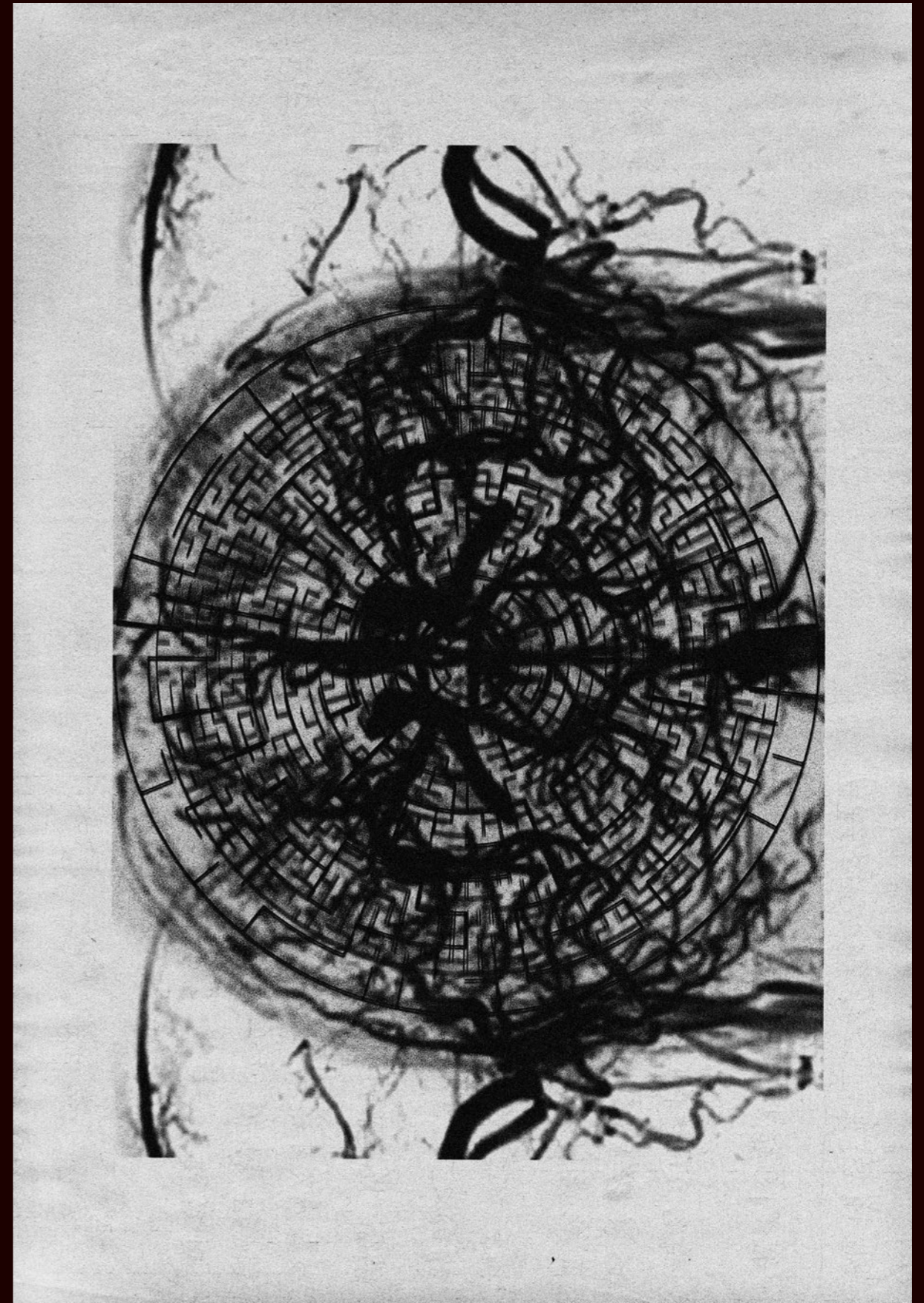
between being silent and having sound, or may even be completely silent to leave room for both participating performers and active audience members to add their own imaginations and narrations. Like the case of Bitai Thoan, where fluid relationships between silent films, narrators, and the audience were found, these contemporary videos would serve not merely as objects for observation, but also as catalysts prompting events that continually expand their significance.

Worn Away is the prologue of a long-term project titled *Her and Her Children* and is also one of several long-term works focused on mutual and self-rescue through “dispelling illusion with *māyā*” under the new caste system.⁵ The idea for the project was first inspired by Chen Chieh-jen’s family members, unemployed workers, and friends who have been engaged in dissent for many years. Even though some have suffered setbacks, faced mental health crises, had their voices silenced by the consensus logic, and are still heeded by very few, their life histories have provided the driving force to carry out this project.

Born in 1960 in Taoyuan, Taiwan, Chen Chieh-jen lives and works in Taipei, Taiwan. Since the early 1980s, he has been a prominent figure in the development of Taiwanese conceptual art. A self-taught artist during Taiwan’s martial law period, he challenged the limits of expression with guerrilla performances, underground exhibitions, and interventions in public spaces. Chen’s practice continues to reflect on the historical events through which he has lived, though he is now best known for ambitious video works that address contemporary social and political issues.

- 1 See https://oi-files-d8-prod.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2019-12/191219_Oxfam_Annual_Report_2018-19.pdf
- 2 See <https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/621477/bp-survival-of-the-richest-160123-en.pdf>
- 3 See <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240049338>
- 4 The Chinese term *yaoyan* originally referred to sayings or rhymes circulating in society that were critical of the government. *Yaoyan* was a strategy relying on poetic language, songs, and fabricated narratives to disrupt authorial mechanisms and comment on social issues. As a result, it produced points of view and social imaginaries that deviated from official narratives.
- 5 The first chapter of *Her and Her Children*, the film *A Field of Non-Field*, was completed in 2017.

On the following pages, you will find six conceptual sketches, and, on the rear side, some thoughts written down before shooting the work *Worn Away*. From each of these notes, Chen Chieh-jen has selected one quote to be translated to English.



风摧肉身 - 工作笔记(整理)

· 我们可能捕捉到“下一秒”的世界的纪录片吗?

首先,这涉及到真实与虚构问题

如果大家所知,所有自我宣称为“真实”的纪录片中,您包含或多或少的虚构成分,而所谓的虚构,您会直接或间接地呈现出“真实”的某一切片。

播下一物,的世界的纪录片,所获得的感觉,会因不同镜头“这一物”的拍摄而不同。

指的一如他者,相似,不断流动的“这一物”,所获得的感觉,会因不同镜头“这一物”的拍摄而不同。

情形,您是因说运动,

又要多久才会到来,如按未明的某种计算方式,人类翻过一页翻去,剩下90秒,然后,只要世界

如按未明的某种计算方式,人类翻过一页翻去,剩下90秒,然后,只要世界

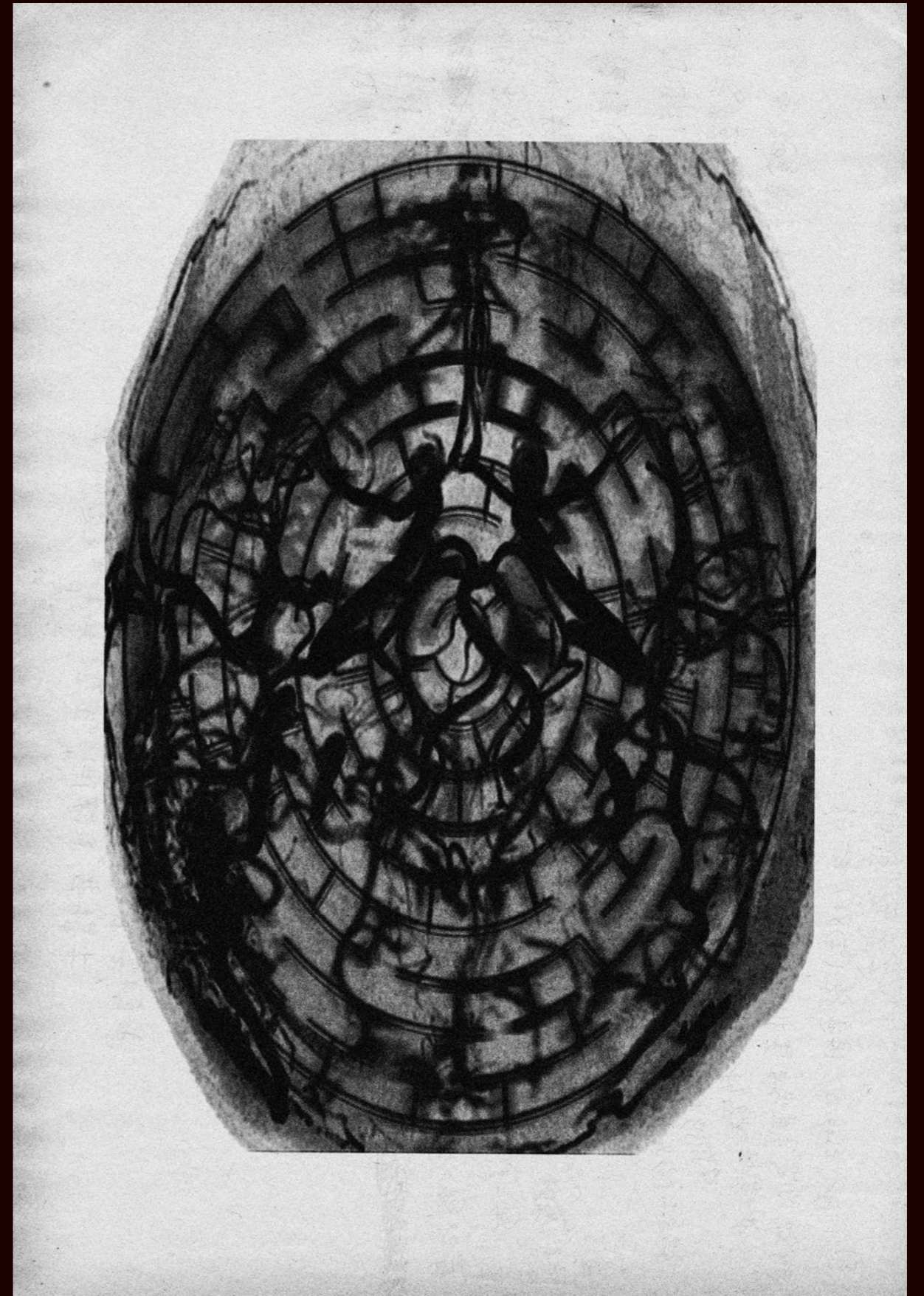
如按未明的某种计算方式,人类翻过一页翻去,剩下90秒,然后,只要世界

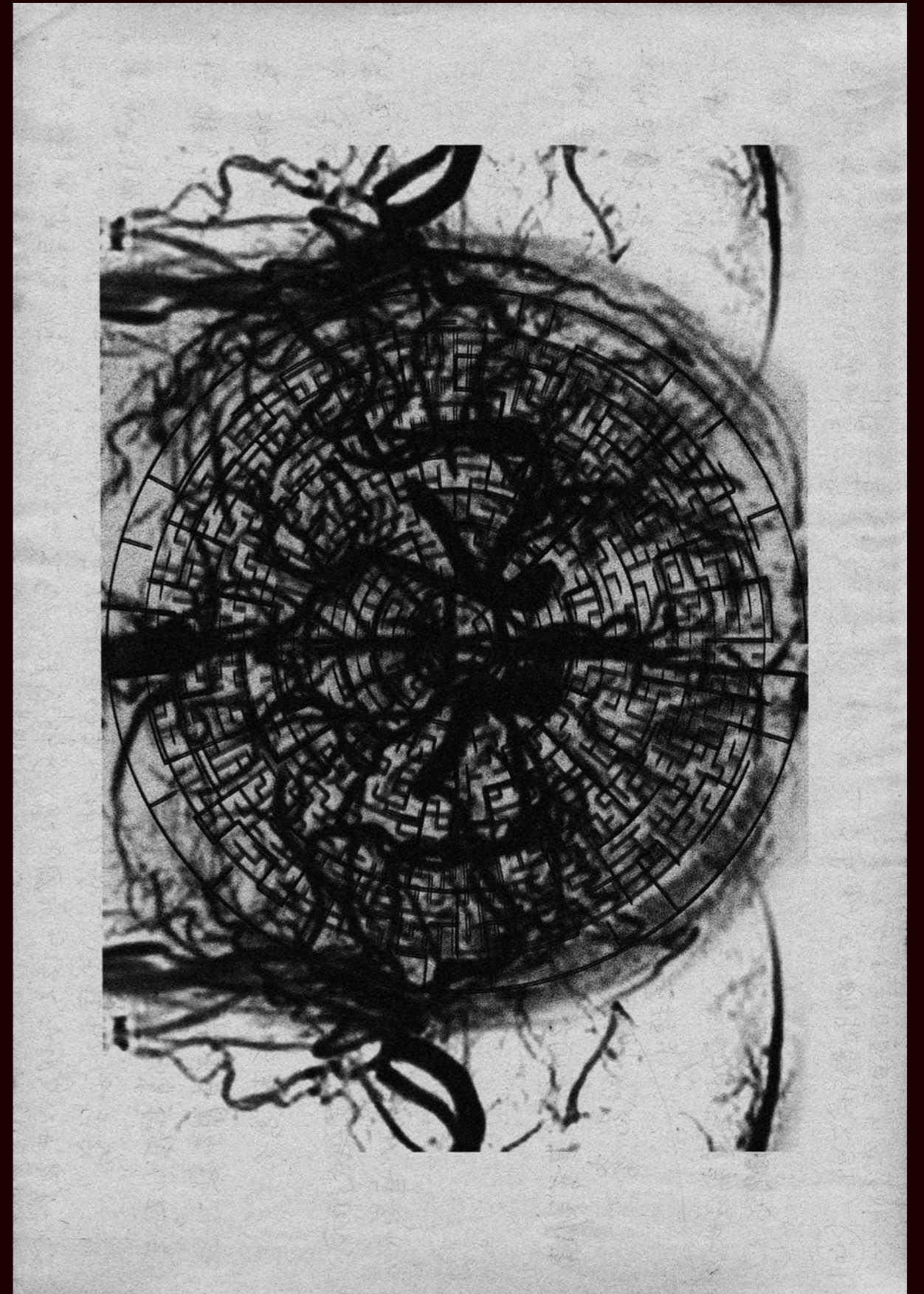
如按未明的某种计算方式,人类翻过一页翻去,剩下90秒,然后,只要世界

①

Is it possible for us to make a documentary about the "next moment"?





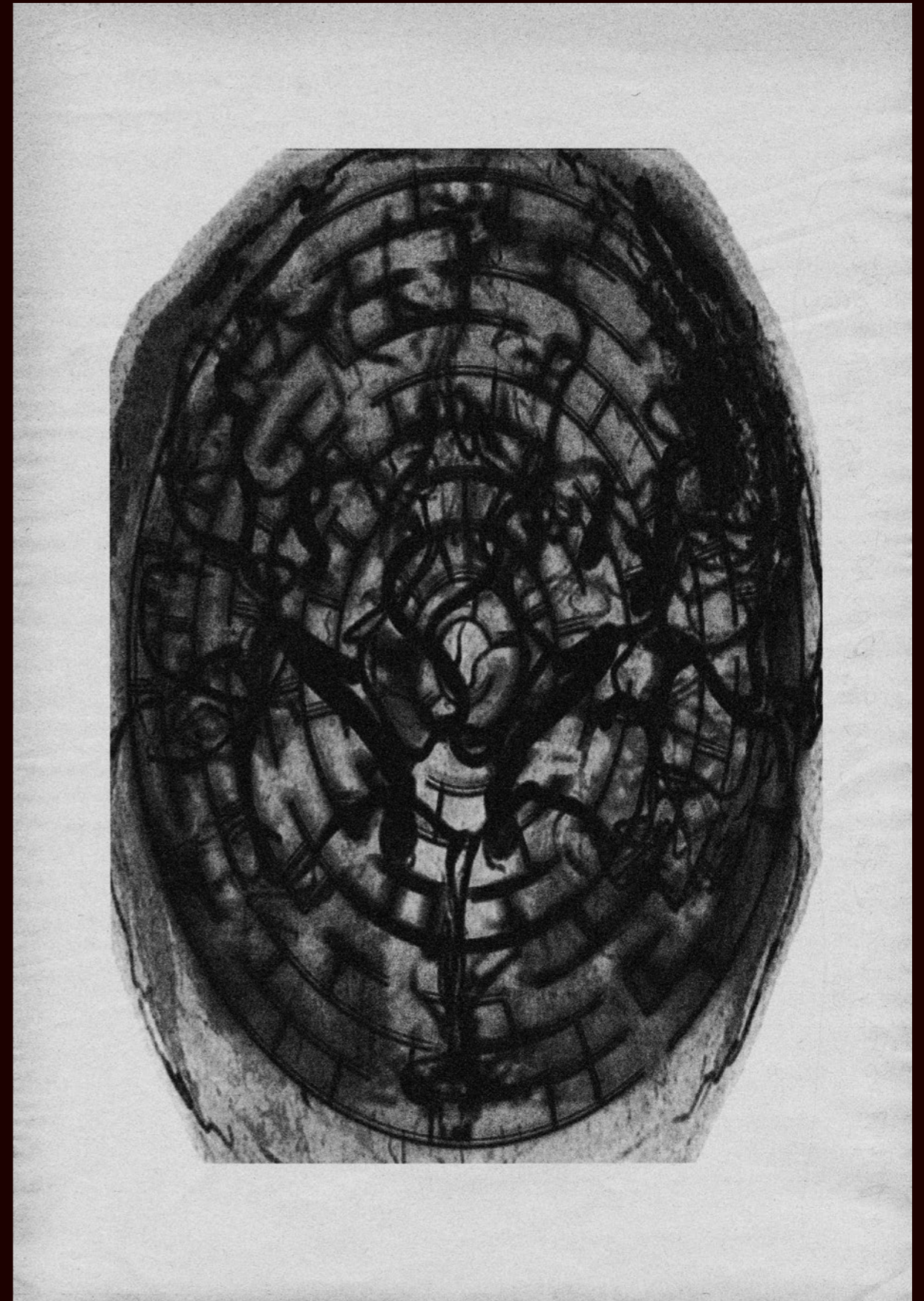




Recently, Geoffrey Hinton, the godfather of deep learning, told us about a new Doomsday Clock. "I think it's quite conceivable that humanity is just a passing phase in the evolution of intelligence," Hinton said.

它可以被不断制造出来，如此，公司可以轻易地制造出各种不同物种与战争——
从日常生活中的“微型社群”开始，到国家与地区、地区与地区之间的经济战，并打靶、大规模军事
智能武器的竞赛，只要如此发展下去，它们便成了“数人战争”，这只能称为“生命军事化”
下，各种各样战争的~~战争~~与材料，以改变了持续这一切的公司与国家所存在
而这就是“这一秒”的世界观，也是公司制造的超越现实下，它们比大多数人更加聪明
那“下一秒”的世界是什么样子？它和现在有什么不同？“共生”，应该是很大的一部分各种形式的可能
但如何才有可能？
我们可以把“下一秒”的世界比作“下一秒”的纪录片吗？

这跟他的意思是说我们像拍摄影片一样，以“早期”的状态，等待“下一秒”
而是说——如果我们要拍正在发生的“下一秒”的纪录片，
那么，我们就像现在的摄像机一样，我们看的是两种意义下的行动者——即“理解公司”
和“人”，在“下一秒”的世界里，我们看的是“人”和“公司”的互动。本来说，
也是“地图”描绘如何走向“下一秒”的世界的~~地图~~。本来说，
地图的意义下的纪录片，也是“地图”与“地图”的互动，但更准确的说法，或许是一个“地图”
可能产生的各种可能，地图的“制造”。
也即人能够理解我们在何时才能与整体性——不执着于任何事物是有限度的“共生”
以及我们走过的道路出口，但我们可以生财吗？——
地图制造



Life is code and code is an unmediated, instant source of surplus value, such would be the dream of techno-capitalism.

As this dream becomes a reality, or rather, as reality is progressively engulfed by the hallucinations gushing forth from this nightmarish desire, life turns into *surplus* in both senses of the word, superfluous and superabundant at the same time. Valued and prized as never before, life in its emergent form as code has also never been so devalued and dispossessed. No longer the carbon-based life of The Many, whose existence was grudgingly permitted only inasmuch as it contributed to its own slow demise through backbreaking toil to produce surplus value for The Few (Classic Capitalism), nor the carbon-based life slated for “necessary” culling inasmuch as a select, genetically “superior” part of the species required bio-political “living space” (Nazism), the emergent silicon-carbon hybrid will have appropriated not just the classic Marxist categories of labor time (*Arbeitszeit*) and species-being (*Gattungswesen*) but speciation itself. Let’s call it “bio-indemnity capitalism.”

Chen Chieh-jen’s *Worn Away* takes up where his *Notes on the Twelve Karmas* (1999/2000 and 2018) leaves off. Whereas the silicon-carbon hybrid of the future dominates the underground world of *Twelve Karmas*, *Worn Away* focuses on the fate of carbon-based life once it has been superseded in the capitalist utopia of *Very Natural Selection*™ that will have replaced biological evolution. In what is effectively a dystopian scenario for carbon-based life, this latter will be thrown into the discard pile, like the fossilized HDDs in *Worn Away*, becoming an immobile rem(a)inder of “what may turn out,” as Naomi Klein succinctly puts it, to have been “the largest and most consequential theft in human history”:¹ the dispossession of the entirety of embodied human knowledge and endeavor by AIs that are the private property of corporations so large they control the future. Henceforth, the entire species is at risk of becoming what Marx called “surplus population” (*relative Überbevölkerung*).

In *Worn Away*, the invisibility of the “corporatocracy” said to dominate a system based on the dispossession of species faculties (knowledge and genetic code) contrasts with the concrete figures that bring to life the mechanisms of domination. Ultimately, the desire for agency is the fuel on which The System runs. The more that carbon-based surplus life in the holding pen aspires to acquire individual agency through some version of The One (individual freedom, collective sovereignty, etc.), the more efficiently the machine of species dispossession functions. Pitting desire against desire, The System relies on the hallucinations of bourgeois agency to achieve its aims. Yet The System is prone to its own form of hallucination. Despite the self-sufficiency promised by the reduction of life to code, The System would not be able to function without the interventions of a professional managerial class (PMC), seen in the female voice on the loudspeaker or the cellphone app designed to manage surplus life, etc. This is the secret of The System, its spectral outside.

If Klein is quick to criticize the “utopian hallucinations about AI” promoted by real-life corporations and their avatars across platforms and domains, the question posed by Chen Chieh-jen’s work amounts to the following: can art help us to escape these hallucinations?

To get a glimpse of the formidable obstacles that a Taiwanese artist would have to overcome just to be able to pose that question without being instantly recuperated into the colonial-imperial bipolarity of the modern regime of translation, it may suffice to cite the controversy in Taiwan surrounding Chen’s decision to travel to China to receive in person the 2018 Award in Art China (AAC). In an atmosphere of moral panic, the Taiwanese traded accusations with each other while hotly contesting not just the politics of a Taiwanese artist receiving

recognition from a civil society organization in Mordor (i.e. China), but also the politics of the body of Chen's work, which has focused primarily on (a) the innovative kind of *colonial governmentality under erasure* exercised by the USA over Taiwan since the surrender of Imperial Japan in 1945, and (b) the global empire of capital, without dealing with (c) the so-called "Chinese mode"² of imperial conquest and hegemony that is regularly used as a pretext to justify a form of *Pax Americana* satellite dependency called, in the fashion of Orwellian doublespeak, "Taiwanese Independence."

If the West is defined precisely as the form of a relation that organizes domination by providing rather than receiving recognition, should we not reflect first on the borders and mediations that make judgment into an overdetermined task? The fact that the Taiwanese controversy of 2018 remained off the radar of an international art world that has largely been restructured to extract value from virally globalized local controversies while preserving the asymmetrical bipolarity of the modern regime of translation is emblematic of what the Taiwanese theorist and curator Chien-hung Huang calls the "paracolonial" infrastructure of artistic production today. The Chinese award, the indifference of the West, and the Taiwanese moral panic are all symptoms of the same paracolonial condition. In response to the AAC award controversy, Huang draws our attention to the multiple layers of "embedded dispossession" that contrive to create and sustain the poles of the "global" and the "local" without which the "zombie governmentality" of the paracolonial could not function.³

By contrast, consider now the media attention given to proposals from US politicians and military strategists to bomb Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Corporation (which accounts for approximately 60% of total global chip production and 90% of the supply of the most advanced chips) rather than allow Mordor to take possession in the event of a hot war in the Taiwan Strait. What would it take to devise a compromise solution that would address the global system of paracoloniality that Taiwanese—despite their disagreements—and so many others register in a particularly acute way? At a moment when a mind-boggling number of planetary resources are being mobilized to militarize the productive forces involved in the dispossession of surplus life, questions like this are regarded as evidence of betrayal by the very same forces that falsely promise to indemnify surplus life. As the TSMC bombing episode shows, it is not just that monopoly control over crucial *common* technology such as semiconductors is the object of militarization—what strategists have called the "silicon shield" supposedly protecting Taiwan—but rather that *the process of militarization itself is becoming internal to the evolutionary development of the technical objects that are increasingly essential to the reproduction of the generic conditions of planetary life today.*

Following an extended foray into the dystopian hallucinations of militarized speciation, *Worn Away* invites us at the end of the film to meditate on the borders and mediations that constitute the illusion of imperial judgment. If "all beings have forever been trapped by illusion," it is only "by not grasping at absolute essence [that] one can be liberated from illusions." This statement contains two lessons for us: (1) the Buddhist themes in *Worn Away* cannot be attributed to the empirical particularities of national culture without violating the spirit of those themes; (2) the prerequisite for liberation from the false promise of indemnity for surplus life lies in alien translations that recreate ourselves not as the proud combatants in a futile contest for species agency, but as the compassionate wanderers and humble caretakers of speciation on this unbounded Earth.

The term used for illusion is a standard one in the lexicon of Chinese Mahayana Buddhism. Composed of two sinograms, *huàn* (deception) and *jìng* (boundary or situation), *huànjìng* illusion seems to be a simple case of a bad situation whose remedy lies in a change of scene. But this is precisely what The System precludes by incorporating it into its model of governance. Hence, a new, alien translation is necessary. In Chinese Zen, the canonical use of the term *jìng* occurs in the *Faith in Mind* (verses traditionally attributed to Sengcan, the Third Patriarch of Chinese Zen). 境由能境, 能由境能 *jìng yóu néng jìng, néng yóu jìng néng*. While conventionally translated as "the subject [*jìng*] is a subject for the object [*néng*]" and vice versa, the Chinese phrase makes no mention of the Cartesian opposition. Rather, it says that the boundary-situation (*jìng*) is situated (*jìng*) only for the agency (*néng*) that traverses (*yóu*) it. By the same token, agency (*néng*) is agential (*néng*) only in relation to the boundary-situation (*jìng*) that defines it. The Buddhist lesson here is dependent origination. Within the realm of illusions caused by dependent origination, "agency" is relative to the limit-situation. To think that one can escape the illusion by relocating to a different place or by re-forming an old species is part of the illusion itself. At a minimum, this means rethinking agency not in terms of autonomous individualized entities, or species, but in terms of trans-individual boundaries that mutually constitute opposing forces tentatively manifesting as "individuals" within the logic of species difference. One name for this agency is *alien translation*.

Caution is required lest "alien translation" simply become a new name for the colonial-imperial, i.e. modern, regime of translation. In *Worn Away*, surplus life is not fully deprived of autonomous mechanistic agency; rather, mechanistic agency has been superseded by decomposition—not just class decomposition, but a form of decomposition so profound that it extends across the field not just of one species, but of speciation (or biological boundary-making) in its entirety. "Art" would be one of the synonyms for a cosmotechnics that hallucinates the recuperation of agency through an aesthetics of the universal and the particular. Arrogating to itself an aerial view such that the "choice" between different sides of a wall not only appears as a coherent whole, but is furthermore taken as empirical evidence of the arealized trap in which the subjects of that choice find themselves (the only causal relation over which surplus life can exercise agency "is," as the narrative voice says, "whether we are on this side of the wall or on that side"), Art offers the compensatory catharsis of the Schmittian political.

Chen Chieh-jen accepts the wager of summoning this Art of The One the better to reject it. While the aerial/areal view, unavailable to those situated on the ground in relation to the wall, appears to offer a superior form of agency, the camera rejects that perspective in favor of detailed still life portraits of fragmentary parts of the inert bodies, blank faces, and glazed eyes of surplus life. Among the arresting images of arrested speciation that compose the minoritarian art of *Worn Away*, one image of agency stands out: the scribbled messages furtively relayed amongst surplus life. The circulation of these messages speaks of a *com-passion* that consists neither in the desire for a change of scene nor in the desire for a more technologically advanced Wall of Protection™, but in the shared passion of passage and passing. This is the *com-passion* of the spectral outside. What is important here is neither the informational content of the message (barely visible to the viewer, it appears, on closer inspection, to repeat the narrative voice-over) nor its transfer, but the act of becoming a "subject in transit."⁴ Unmediated by the universalism and particularism of the PMC, the alien translation enacted by subjects in transit is perhaps our only chance to move beyond the resentful agency

of an ephemeral species increasingly invested in the futile militarization and false indemnity of intra- and inter-species boundaries. To move, in other words, beyond species to speciation, to become compassionately sensitive to the perilously unbounded nature of shared speciation as dependent origination, to let the illusion of “species” be worn away, so to speak, by speciation.

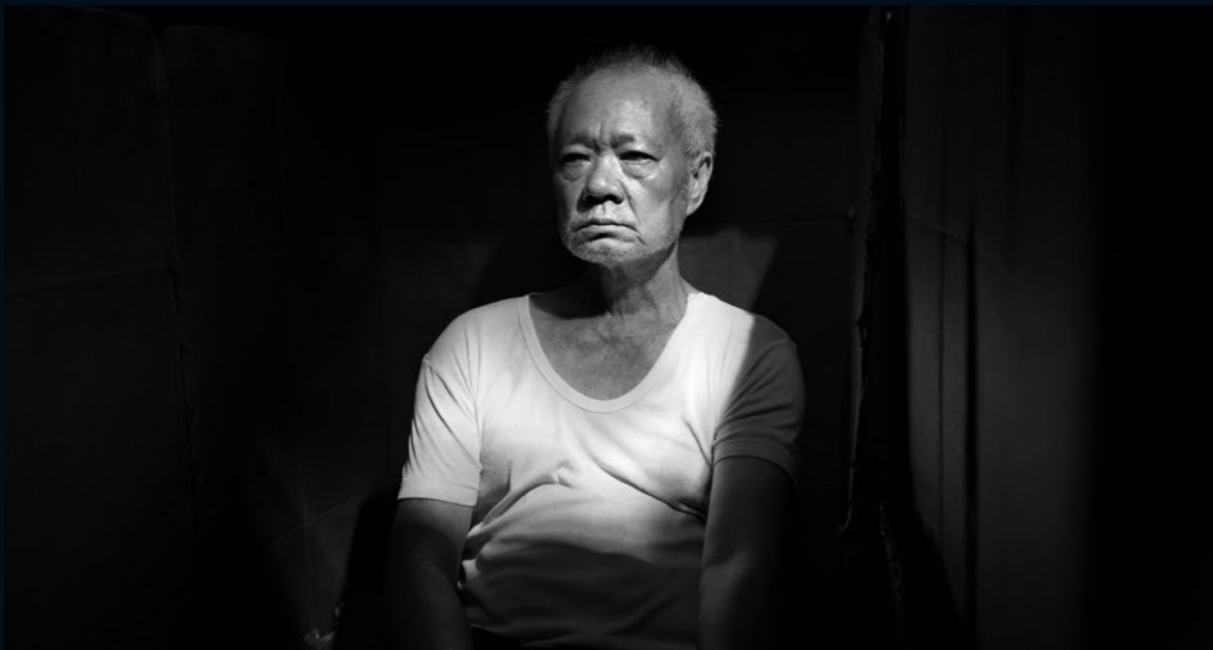
Jon Solomon is a professor in the Department of Chinese at Université Jean Moulin in Lyon and a research director at the CRPM, Université Paris Nanterre. He lived in Taiwan for 20+ years before relocating to France where he specializes in a critique of area studies from the perspective of translation theory with particular attention to Sinophone cultures. In 2022, he published *A Genealogy of the Defeat of the Left: Translation, Transition, and Bordering in the Hong Kong Protest Movement of 2019* (in Chinese) and “Wynter Is Coming: Black Communism, Translation, and Technics” for the exhibition *Ceremony: Burial of an Undead World* at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin; his next work, *The Taiwan Consensus and the Ethos of Area Studies: Spectral Transitions* (in English), is forthcoming in 2023.

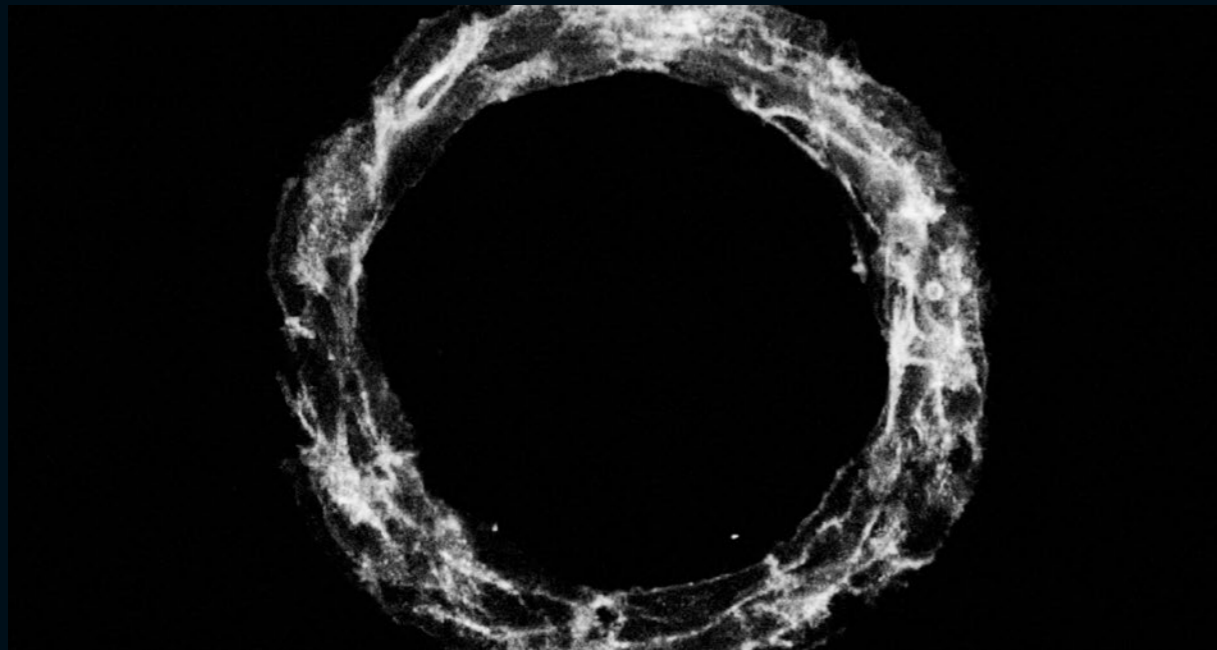
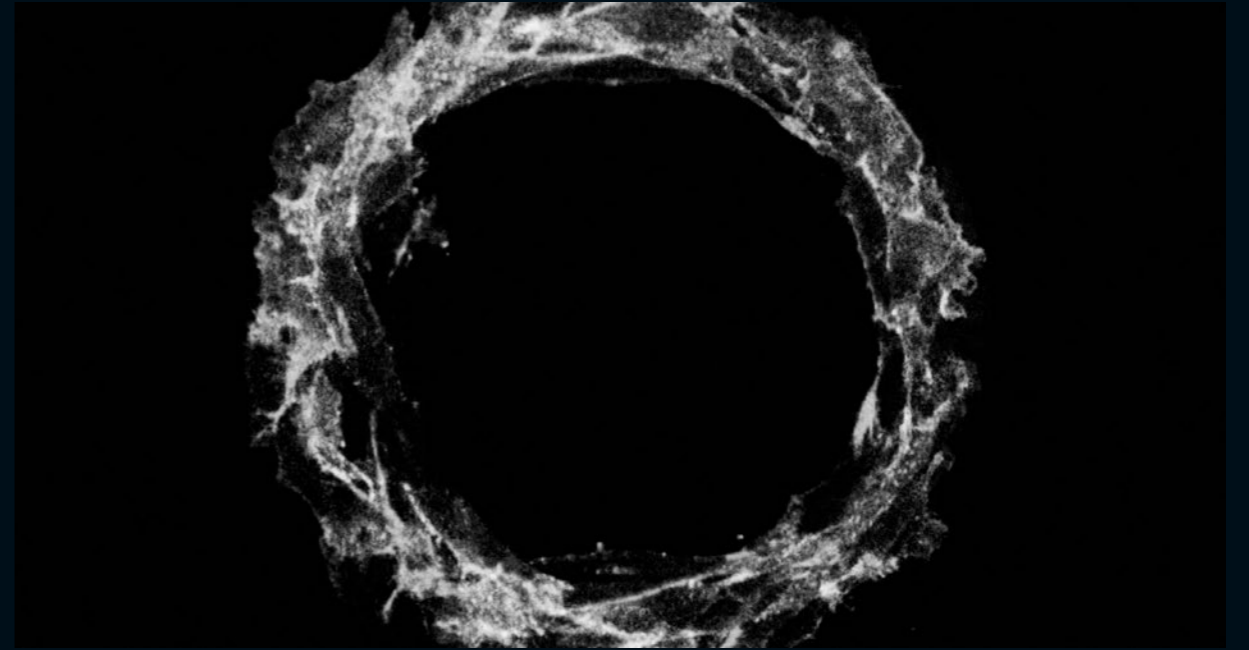
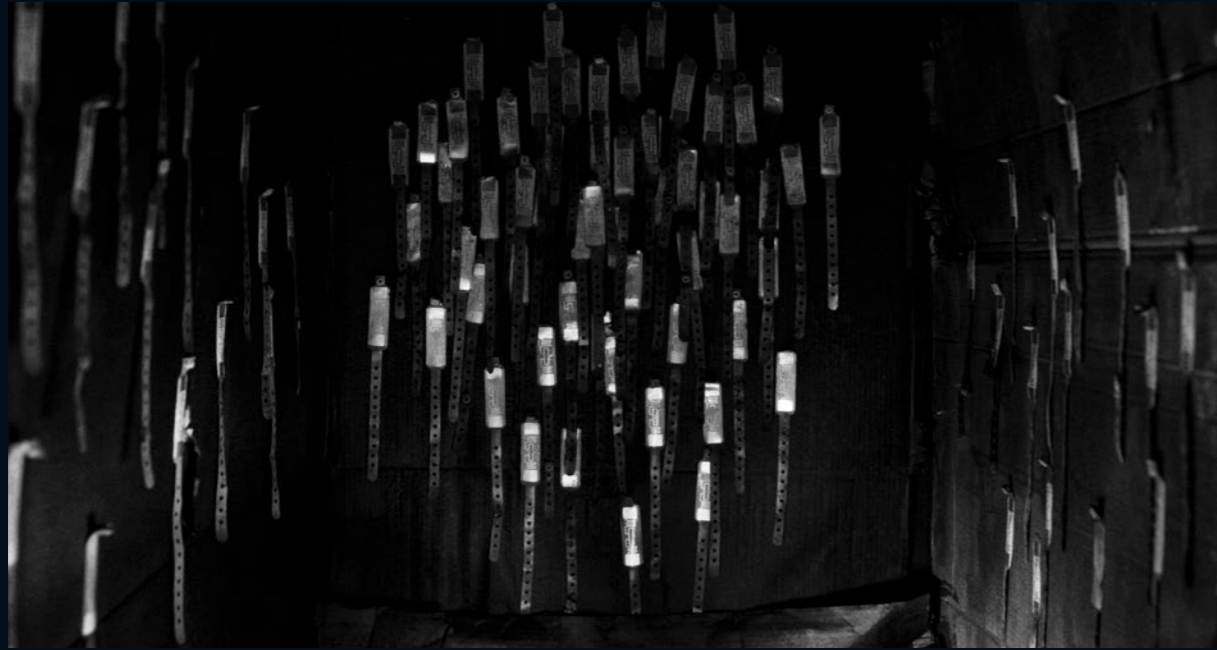
- 1 Naomi Klein, “AI machines aren’t ‘hallucinating.’ But their makers are.” *The Guardian*, May 8, 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/may/08/ai-machines-hallucinating-naomi-klein>
- 2 This is the criticism of Chen Chieh-jen expressed by the art critic and theorist Tai-sang Chen. See Chen, Tai-sang, “*Guanyu Chen Chieh-jen de ‘Diguó Bianjie’ kao huo buyi – zhuzhong, yumin, yu anaqi zhuyi*,” November 5, 2018, <https://artouch.com/art-views/content-19.html>.
- 3 See in particular chapter 8 of Huang, Chien-hung, *Qianzhi xuyu Fragments on Paracolonial*, Taipei: 2019.
- 4 The term is taken from Naoki Sakai’s innovative theorization of the position of the translator. See Naoki Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity*, Minneapolis: 1997, p. 11 passim.

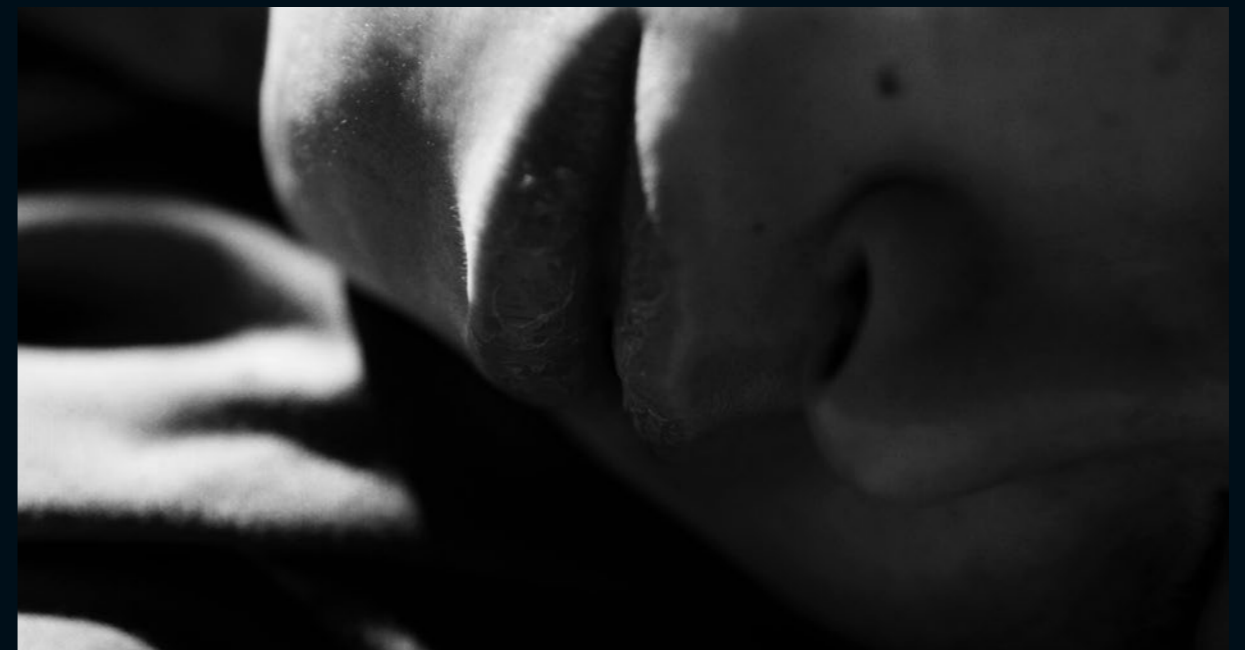


Chen Chieh-jen
Worn Away
2022–23
Single channel video, 16:9, black and white, sound, 69'30",
continuous loop projection













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Secession

Exhibition

Chen Chieh-jen

Worn Away

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Galtsov

with

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
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