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PRESS KIT

CHEN CHIEH-JEN

FACTORY, THE ROUTE, EMPIRE'S BORDERS I & II

05/10/2013 - 19/01/2014

Press release

CHEN CHIEH-JEN

FACTORY, THE ROUTE, EMPIRE'S BORDERS I & II

Exhibition from 5 October 2013 to 19 January 2014

Since the 1980s, Chen Chieh-jen, born in Taiwan in 1960, has been developing a body of work that is closely connected with the history of his country. In it, he interrogates the structures of power, the writing of history and collective memory in a society that in his opinion has lost any form of identity under the autocratic rule of the Chinese nationalist Kuomintang (1949–1987) and the phase of neo-liberalism that has since replaced it. 'Taiwanese society', the artist says, 'has been repeatedly forced to become one with historical amnesia and has lost the ability to imagine and reflect on the future from the context of the past.' His works, in which specific, mostly suppressed historical and present-day aspects of the current situation become visible, can be seen as a form of resistance against this forgetting.

Chen Chieh-jen's artistic career began with illegal actions performed in the public sphere, before he turned to digital processing of archive photos, and for over a decade now, he has focused on the production of ambitious video works. These films, in which the artist directly addresses social and political issues connected with Taiwan's current situation, broach issues such as the consequences of globalisation for the labour market (*Factory*), the complex relationships that Taiwan has with the two "empires", the USA and the People's Republic of China (*Empire's Borders I*), the resistance in the workers' movement (*The Route*) and the forgotten chapters in the recent history of his country (*Empire's Borders II – Western Enterprises, Inc.*).

Chen Chieh-jen's works make visible both universal issues and individual fates. The artist regularly involves in the production of his films non professional actors from social fringe groups that are the subject of his films: unemployed people, minorities, political opponents, activists. With their slow rhythm, Chen Chieh-jen's films have retained something of a photographic character. The artist is less concerned with precise historical reconstruction than with exposing the emotions and feelings of his protagonists in a brief restoration of their community.

The starting and central point of this exhibition, in which Chen Chieh-jen presents four films made from 2003 to 2010, is a specially created installation, a "temporary cinema" in which an excerpt from his most recent film, *Happiness Building I* (2012), is to be seen. The image of the eight young people who together, but without really belonging in a group, push a baggage trolley in a seemingly aimless and endless fashion becomes a metaphor for the contemporary society of his country.

EMPIRE'S BORDERS I (2008–2009)

In the two-part film *Empire's Borders I*, Chen Chieh-jen speaks of the discriminations and injustices that states use to protect themselves against allegedly unlawful visitors. After the artist himself was subjected to humiliating experiences at the American Institute in Taiwan when applying for a temporary visa for the USA, he created the blog *The Illegal Immigrant* to collect reports of compatriots who had similar experiences; mostly, young, single, highly educated women with good English have been rejected. While American citizens do not need a visa to travel to Taiwan, the former protecting power views travellers from this country with great mistrust.

Chen Chieh-jen used the descriptions collected on his blog for the film *Empire's Borders I*. In the first part of the film, eight young actresses act out some of these reports in an authentically reconstructed set, while the second part makes it apparent that Taiwanese authorities cultivate a similar degree of mistrust towards wives coming from the Chinese mainland. Some of these women tell their own story here.



Empire's Borders I, 2008–2009

35 mm transferred to DVD, colour and black and white, sound, single channel. Duration: 27'. © Image: Chen You-wei

EMPIRE'S BORDERS II – WESTERN ENTERPRISES, INC. (2010)

During the Korean War at the start of the 1950s, the CIA, under the cover name of 'Western Enterprises, Inc.', supported the Chinese Nationalist regime (Kuomintang), which had fled to Taiwan, against the People's Republic by training the Anti-Communist National Salvation Army for the clashes that repeatedly flared up. Between 1950 and 1979, the USA thus backed a dictatorship under which political dissidents, above all communists, were for some decades systematically persecuted.

The film *Empire's Borders II*, shot in a now abandoned chemical factory that was still in operation in the 1950s, was inspired by the story of Chen Chieh-jen's father. This man, who came from a poor background, had served as a soldier. After his death, he left behind only his faked autobiography, a list of soldiers fallen at sea, an album whose photos had been burnt and his old uniform. In the film, the abandoned factory becomes a symbolic labyrinth in which six decades of Taiwanese history are represented, inhabited by ghost-like figures, the forgotten of history: a soldier looking for his military record, people persecuted by the dictatorship who cannot leave the building, unemployed who seem to be caught in a trap amid deserted industrial facilities...

The search for clues that is depicted in the film is a melancholy reflection on the futile role of the individual within a society that has become caught up in a geopolitical conflict, on remembering and the loss of memory, and on the formerly successful role of the country as a manufacturing supplier of the worldwide consumer society.



Empire's Borders II – Western Enterprises, Inc., 2010

35 mm transferred to Blu-ray Disc, three-channel video installation, black and white, sound. Video 1: 70' 12". Video 2 & 3: 5' 45". © Image: Chen You-wei

FACTORY (2003)

In the 1990s, even in Taiwan, one of the Asian Tiger states, the increasing liberalisation of the labour market in the course of globalisation led to labour-intensive industries moving to countries with lower wages. The Lien Fu garment factory in Taoyuan in the north of Taiwan, which had operated successfully for decades, was shut down in 1996 without the workers receiving pension claims or compensation payments. *Factory* is the result of an encounter between Chen Chieh-jen and former women workers of that factory, who had already protested for six years against the conditions of their dismissal. The artist asked them to perform their old familiar tasks in the halls of the abandoned factory once more. The blending of several temporal layers in the slow camera movements through the former workshops, which alternate with propagandistic archive footage and long shots of the women sewing, produces a loose narrative that goes beyond the specific situation to hint at the human aspect to the moving of labour in general.

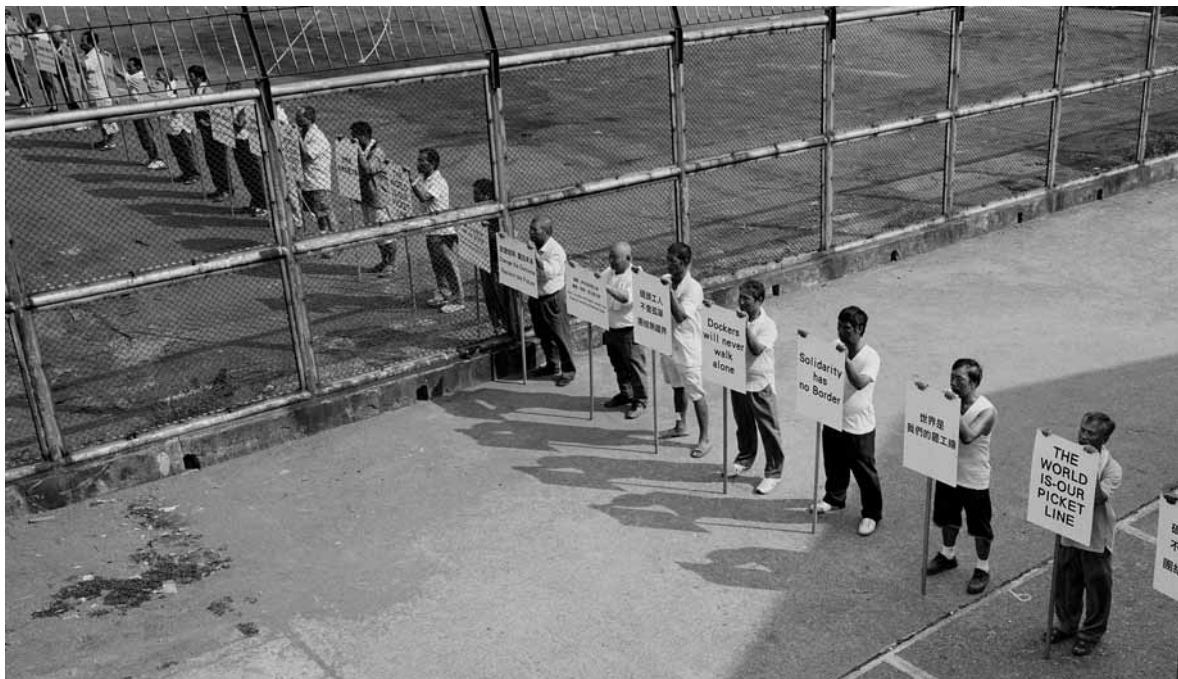


Factory, 2003

Super 16 mm transferred to DVD, colour, silent, single channel video installation. Duration: 31' 9". © Image: Chen Chieh-jen

THE ROUTE (2006)

Made for the Liverpool Biennial 2006, *The Route* is about the more than two-year-long strike from 1995–1998 by Liverpool dock workers who were reacting to arbitrary dismissals in the wake of the privatisation of English ports in the Thatcher years. Because of strikes called in solidarity, the container ship Neptune Jade, which was loaded by strikebreakers in Liverpool in 1997, was not discharged at its port of destination, Oakland, or later in Vancouver, Yokohama or Kobe and finally ended its route in the Taiwanese port city of Kaohsiung, where it was probably auctioned off along with its cargo. In his film, Chen Chieh-jen staged a symbolic three-day strike with several of the workers at this Taiwanese port, where in 1997 a union-organised strike against the privatisation policies of their government also took place. In the dialogue it initiates between these two events, *The Route* becomes a symbolic representation of globalised solidarity in a world at the mercy of globalised capitalism.



The Route, 2006

35 mm transferred to DVD, black and white, silent, single channel. Duration: 16' 45". © Image: Chen Chieh-jen

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FACTORY, THE ROUTE, EMPIRE'S BORDERS I & II

Exhibition

from 5 October 2013 to 19 January 2014

Curator

Enrico Lunghi

Opening hours

Wednesday - Friday: 11 am - 8 pm

Saturday - Monday: 11 am - 6 pm

Closed on Tuesday

Closed on 1 November, 25 December and 1st January. Open until 3 pm on December 24 and 31.

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Images

Available on request and as a download on <http://www.mudam.lu/en/presse/>

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