

A Field of Non-Field 2017

Chen Chieh-jen

Blu-ray disc, b/w and color, sound, single-channel video, 61' 07", continuous loop

Introduction

Today, as all capital and technology are being absorbed by the finance-techno capitalist system, and new administrative forms of global control technology are being developed with even greater penetrative power, people are basically being reduced to dispatch workers who are imprisoned by globalization or exiled in their own homes. (1) Under these social conditions of global control in the post-Internet age, it is nearly impossible to break through individual desire, thinking, and sensory structures. Is there a way for people to get out from under this situation?

In addressing this seemingly unsolvable problem, Chen Chieh-jen has not applied his thinking and artistic practice to speculation about the suspension of technological development or accelerationism. Instead, he is interested in the question of emptiness and the multiple dialectical spirit of The Middle Way which are found in the Madhyamaka school of Buddhist philosophy established by Nāgārjuna. (2) Through this experimental practice, Chen discusses ways of establishing another epistemology, way of thinking, and value system in a world that has been overrun by global control technology, and how this new establishment can serve as a method of changing this technology.

A Field of Non-Field is the first chapter of Chen Chieh-jen's long-term project *Her and Her Children*, (3) and a preliminary perceptual statement after deep reflection on Madhyamaka philosophy. Chen's original inspiration for creating this video work comes from his eldest brother's experiences of being unemployed (see Chen's artist statement for *Star Chart*).

Soon after *A Field of Non-Field* starts, a woman who never appears in the film says in a voice-over that her brother disappeared without a trace after escaping from a hospital where he had been confined several days before because of a suicide attempt. She says, according to what her mother keeps telling her, "my brother just went somewhere far away, beyond the west." In a later part of the film, she says that her mother changes her response to "your brother is just on his way back," whenever she mentions that she hasn't heard any news from her brother. In sequences from the film that appear later or between these two voice-overs, a group of actors is seen in an empty field performing the role of her brother and other people who are "traveling away" and then "coming back."

As these different actors perform the journey to some undetermined place, they seem to be holding a funeral for the brother in the darkness of night, even though he is still alive. (4) Also, in the limitless darkness of this night, unending construction sounds can be heard in the distance. Together, the darkness and sound create a jail without walls, from which no one can ever escape. The barren land used as the setting for the film is bathed in artificial light and forms the theatrical space for this prison without walls. The group performing the funeral is composed of people with different identities and put together with objects, and the significance of these people juxtaposed with objects keeps changing in this fluid group.

A funeral banner made of old discarded worker's clothing is leading the group of actors taking part in what seems like a traditional funeral, and objects that are traditionally interred with the body are replaced with old computers, radios, and plastic models of human organs. (5) The brother is seen lying in a coffin that looks like a modern apartment building and staring into the endless void. As the brother is moving along with the procession

of actors, a voice-over narration identifies the man as the woman's brother and also makes reference to dispatch workers in contemporary society, the consumption of the corporeal body under capitalism, and discarded people who question the meaning of life. Continually moving forward, the silent laborers carry the brother in the apartment-building casket on a stretcher. This becomes the place for this discarded person to lie down and then tell his story, thus subtly turning the actors performing the traditional funeral rites into a fluid group that confronts global control technology.

Following the group carrying the brother is another group of silent laborers carrying an insane woman holding a mirror on a high framework platform. She is facing the blurry mirror that never reflects her image and a voice-over is heard muttering a string of self interrogatory statements, "When did we accept being sentenced to at-home exile? Was it when we could no longer flee assigned numbers? Or was it after we were used to forcing the entire future into a form?" The group performing the funeral procession starts to take on two, or even multiple, meanings. With the laborers' support, the woman in which self examination and insanity simultaneously exists, transforms from a discarded person into a narrator. Her whispering becomes a voice of dissent against that infinite dark night and the sound of non-stop construction.

The group continues to move forward to a mysterious solar eclipse that impossibly occurs in the dark night, and this makes the immense construction site sounds grind to a halt. (6) The world falls into complete silence. At this point, a different group of silent laborers carrying a huge model combining an apartment building and jail appear out of the dark. As they seemed to be both moving forward and marching in place, a flame mysteriously comes out of the architectural model and then continues to intensify. Just as it seems the fire will swallow the entire model, its light shines on the gray, exhausted and expressionless faces of the silent laborers. The only sounds in this world are from the growing flame and friction of the moving air. These material sounds that surround the laborers are ever-changing and the only ones that exist in this otherwise silent world.

In the sound of the flame's constant variation, the many voices from far and near are heard chanting, "What can we do? Nameless. Nameless, what can we do?" (7) Next we see a group of middle-aged woman-workers holding protest banners with traces of writing that can no longer be read and continually chanting the sentences above. The camera slowly moves from the group to close-ups of the women's faces. In the dark and invisible surroundings, their expressions seem to suggest the past, but their voices seem to suggest the present, and the two continually mix together. Following the incessant chanting, it starts to rain, and the women's voices gradually become more urgent as the rain becomes stronger. The camera then turns to an area behind the women where their backlit silhouettes seem to become a group of many Guanyins who are listening to each other. (8) They do not expect mercy from others but rely on each other for support. The Chinese name "Guanyin" (觀音) means "sound perceiver," literally "the one who listens to the cries of those who are in need," in this sense, these women workers serve as Guanyin for one another.

The rain falling on the women is also falling on the brother who is still lying in his coffin that looks like a modern apartment building on a stretcher. He continues to stare blankly, and his eyes have become vessels for the falling rain. The falling rain and the chanting seem to cleanse the brother's empty expression.

With all bodily senses, the audience experiences the varied mood of the monotonous chanting in the Hakka language for twelve minutes, and is also subjected to the inscrutable life stories reflected on the women's faces.

In the next part of the film, after the rain has cleaned everything, a group of silent laborers carry on a tall chair a disabled person who chants a list of seemingly irrelevant words such as "illusion, nothing, nonsense, mania." (9) These words removed from grammatical context are strung together and spoken endlessly, thus setting their meanings aloft into the indefinite darkness. And this, just like the constellation of images on the star chart behind the disabled person, becomes a constellation of spoken words. The dust kicked up as the group marches forward becomes a floating dust constellation in the dark space. All three constellations exist together in this space lacking starlight, and due to its constant movement, the funeral procession becomes a fluid group generating multiple images and meanings.

The funeral procession actors are just like the countless stars, or floating pieces of cosmic dust, as they perform a contemporary version of Lo-deh Sao. (10) The actors deliver the body and produce continuous change, and this makes people, things, environments, and sounds slowly manifest complexity and multiple meanings that are different from their original classifications and definitions. These multiple meanings continually overlap and reproduce an excess of different forms, and this excess is not only an excess of the perception framework dominated by global control technology, but also the reproduction of alternative perceptions that are difficult to define.

In the return journey part of the film, the group has disappeared, and we only see the brother walking in a barren land. Footprints from the previous traveling away part of the film are almost visible on the ground. The endless darkness continues as before, and the distant sound of a construction site still envelops this nameless place. The artificial light looks even more like theatrical lighting as it shines on this real piece of barren land. The lone brother keeps walking until he hears the happy voices of the women workers singing a Hakka song from somewhere behind him, and then he slowly turns around to look. (11) He looks at the silent laborers who are sitting or lying on pebbles on the ground and resting. The women workers casually form an irregular circle and amuse themselves by continuing to sing the same song and dancing. The brother, who is now standing still, listens with rapt attention as the women continue to dance and sing even louder. We can sense that this is a contemporary Lo-deh Sao performance and they have formed a temporary heterotopia. The song and breeze combine into a complementary rhythm and then together blow over the brother's clothes and gauze bandages wrapping his wrists. As the last sentence of the song, "The scarf tells of our never ending love," is heard, the final scene of the return journey fades to black.

It is never explained why the brother attempted suicide, or where the destinations of either the going or returning parts of the journey are. But even sketchy familiarity with the multiple dialectics in Madhyamaka philosophy, a universal folk knowledge that has been pushed to the margins by so-called modernity in contemporary times, will tell us that there are no absolute definitions of "going" or "returning." Through a narrative of neither going, nor returning, this contemporary Lo-deh Sao performance renders the gradually naturalized states of local exile visible to us, and call on the multiple dialectic in Madhyamaka philosophy. This allows us to follow alternative perceptions or other dialectical movements, and to discover a possible crevice within what we originally considered to be a dark night, wasteland, prison without walls, or a global control technology impossible to escape. This crevice can be transformed and re-transformed because no system is absolute or unbreakable.

Like his previous films, *A Field of Non-Field* does not provide any solution to real difficulties. They instead become suspended in a state awaiting continued confrontation and investigation, such that viewers become aware of related problems beyond the film. In other words, while the film serves as a carrier for the artist's creativity, it is not a crystallization of self-fulfillment. His works are never one thing because they are formed by connecting marginalized individuals and groups who participate in performances, incomplete narratives with heterogeneous fragments, and stimulate problem awareness by making visible difficult situations that demand further discussions. Also, his works are about starting a multiple dialectical movement that reverberates in the same way the women workers sing "never ending love." (12) Although we cannot predict its effect, as soon as it is started, it will certainly never end. (13)

1 In 2010, Chen Chieh-jen started paying close attention to the global increase of dispatch workers under the global technology of control fostered by neoliberalism in the post-internet age. This is also a kind of neo-colonialism that no longer draws borders based on nation states. He called this universal phenomenon "global imprisonment and at-home exile." In 2010, Chen expressed support for docents at the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts (dispatch workers who do not enjoy labor rights), and their protest movement, which was getting very little attention. In 2012, while working for a year on his art project *Happiness Building*, he proposed how to form randomly composed, temporary communities whose members support and challenge each other. In 2016, he held the *Global Imprisonment and At-Home Exile* workshop together with the Taiwan Higher Education Union and NCCU Art and Culture Center, where discussions with youth focused on the historical sources and evolution of dispatch labor and youth poverty, as well as possible solutions. In this long process, Chen gained deep, first-hand experience showing that the rebellion of traditional social movements cannot change these severe problems if the desire structure, ways of thinking, and social imagination implanted by global control technology of the post-Internet era are not transformed. *A Field of Non-Field* is the first step of his long-term confrontation with a new biopolitics in the post-Internet era.

2 Nāgārjuna expanded the Shakyamuni Buddha's notion of the Middle Way with more rigorous demonstrations in his Madhyamaka philosophy. He used three basic themes: *pratītyasamutpāda*, *niṣvabhāva*, and *śūnyata*; and the Eight Negations (neither birth, nor death; neither end, nor permanence; neither identity, nor difference; neither coming, nor going) to explain that everything is relative, dependent on everything else for its existence, and always changing. In this way, absolutism can be destroyed. Chen Chieh-jen referred to this method as multiple dialectic and believes that studying Madhyamaka philosophy is a way of countering the new biopolitics of today's dominant global control technology.

3 The brother's life story in *Star Chart* and *A Field of Non-Field* was mainly inspired by experiences of Chen Chieh-jen's brother who, along with other middle-aged workers, became unemployed due to the 1997 Asian financial crisis. Chen is also interested in the early 1990s, the period leading up to the crisis, when dispatch work in Taiwan became normalized; computers, the Internet, and mobile devices became universal; and technological optimism claimed computers, the Internet, and mobile devices would transform mainstream discourse to include new, decentralized political forms. The current reality, however, proves that as long as private ownership continues to monopolize technology (such as intellectual property rights) technology will continue to advance centralized ownership and focus its power to manipulate individual and social imagination. Also, dispatch work will be the fate of the majority of people.

4 Performers include women workers from Hualon Corporation, labor activists, unemployed workers, culture workers who have been self organizing for many years, a member of the Standing Meditation group which has been voicing their support for Palestinian rights for many years, and others who have collaborated with Chen Chieh-jen for many years.

5 Carrying a funeral procession banner (soul banner) is part of the local folk tradition and is intended to guide the soul to peaceful rest in a western paradise.

6 There are three montages in front of the image of the eclipse, and all are actually images of man-made objects. They are, in the order that they appear: the integrated circuits on a motherboard that look like an abandoned city and appear while the younger sister is relating her brother's experience in a voice-over; dividing cancer cells (taken from a documentary film) that the brother sees during his funeral procession; reproducing muscle cells from a rat in a biotech experiment (taken from a documentary film) that are seen by the insane woman; and the eclipse that seems to be a real, but was actually created in the studio, and seen by the brother.

7 Most of the women workers were from the Hualon Corporation. These two sentences were derived from discussions among these women. For details concerning the long history of protests by the Hualon women workers (Chinese), see:

<https://zh.wikipedia.org/zh->

[tw/%E8%8F%AF%E9%9A%86%E8%87%AA%E6%95%91%E6%9C%83%E6%8A%97%E7%88%AD%E6%AD%B7%E5%8F%B2](https://zh.wikipedia.org/zh-tw/%E8%8F%AF%E9%9A%86%E8%87%AA%E6%95%91%E6%9C%83%E6%8A%97%E7%88%AD%E6%AD%B7%E5%8F%B2)

8 Guanyin, also known as Avalokiteśvara, is a Bodhisattva, which is an enlightened being that forgoes nirvana out of compassion in order to save others. After spreading to China, Buddhism was mixed with local Taoist beliefs, and Avalokiteśvara's role in the folk beliefs of Chinese society became widespread. Avalokiteśvara was originally presented in male form, but later, female depictions became more prevalent. Those who relieve the hardship of others came to be called Guanyin among the Chinese people. For more information regarding Avalokiteśvara and the history of folk beliefs, see:

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guanyin>

9 The performer is Cheng Chi-chung, a well known actor in Taiwan's community theater. He also volunteers for Standing Meditation, a group that supports human rights in Palestine. His disability is not apparent in the film, but his unique sitting posture would be difficult for others to achieve.

10 Lo-deh Sao is a pre-modern theatrical form which included local operas performed by farmers in the off-season for villagers. There were no distinctions between farmers and performers, or professionals and amateurs, as most of these cultural productions were spontaneously organized for self-amusement. The name "Lo-deh Sao" comes from the Minnan dialect spoken in Taiwan and nearby regions of China. Chen Chieh-jen believes his contemporary form of Lo-deh Sao, which focuses on forming communities with marginalized and atomized individuals, may be one way to transform current biopolitics, and activities such as collaborating on the creation of a film can produce discourse on contemporary topics.

11 The Hakka language song is titled *A Floral Scarf* and was written by the now deceased Hakka composer Lin Tzu-yuan. The Nanguan (a southern style of Chinese classical music) song performed by a female soloist as the film begins is called *A Plea to Lady Chang'e*. Both are songs about pining for a lover who has gone away.

12 Although the lyrics of *A Floral Scarf* describes only one lover, from the film's beginning, when the woman soloist sings *A Plea to Lady Chang'e*, to its ending, when the group of women are singing *A Floral Scarf*, they are referring to more than one lover.

13 *A Field of Non-Field* was produced in cooperation with SAMUSO in Seoul, Korea.

Written by Hu Ching-ya