DOCILE, MUTATING AND RESISTANT BODIES

SHU LEA CHEANG
BY BANYI HUANG

(Previous spread)
FSB X, 2019, still from 4K video: 10 min, from the film series for the installation *3x3x6* at the 58th Venice Biennale's Taiwan Pavilion, 2019. All images courtesy the artist.

(This page)
I.K.U., 2000, poster for film: 74 min.

(Opposite page)
FRESH KILL, 1994, still from video with color and sound: 1 hour 19 min.

In 1998, the famed science-fiction writer and literary critic Samuel R. Delany sent a letter of rejection, via fax, to Shu Lea Cheang. In his characteristically polite and analytical tone, Delany lamented that he was not able to write the screenplay for Cheang's then-upcoming film, *I.K.U.* Cheang had invited Delany to write *I.K.U.* because she believed he would not only be able to provide an added dimension of fantasy and futurity to her Japanese sci-fi porno, but also imbue a sheer abandonment and indulgence into the script, potentially transforming the depiction of sex on screen. But it was the wrong place and time. Ironically for Cheang, a self-proclaimed "digital nomad" who at the time was doing a residency in Tokyo, the New York-based Delany did not have email, making their long-distance communication extremely difficult. The two could only communicate via fax and phone calls. What could be invariably described as a "missed connection" nonetheless illuminates the way Cheang bridges a multitude of cultural domains and relates to other artists, who are not so much her collaborators as they are the rhizomic branches of her various elaborate, multilayered open-source projects.

For almost 40 years, Cheang has worked at the intersection of a variety of disciplines including multimedia installation, net art, media activism, film, and bio-net intervention. Taking into account her unanchored trajectory from Taiwan to New York and Paris over these years, Cheang's practice has resisted being institutionalized or canonized, and she has remained fiercely radical, firmly underground and hopelessly devoted to carving out new grounds for experimentation. Across the wide range of formats, a consistent theme at the core of Cheang's thinking is reimagining how the body's relationship to technology evolves within a regime where neoliberal politics, multinational corporations and the biomedicine industry are exerting ever tighter control, and how the plasticity of identity could coexist within that framework.

"Turn me on and tune me in"
Born in Taiwan in 1954, Cheang moved to New York City to study film at New York University in the late 1970s. Shortly after, she joined the collective Paper Tiger Television and started producing live weekly programs that used public-access channels to reach cable subscribers. The collective's mission was to analyze how mainstream media shaped popular aesthetics and social identity, and they often employed strategically amateurish and guerilla approaches that encouraged viewers to become producers themselves. As such, Cheang's foray into video production and immersive installations has its origins in a grassroots media activism that struggled to formulate a critical, collective consciousness of corporate media's increasing monopolization over broadcast television. Yet the nonhierarchical structure of these activist groups shaped the artist's collaborative methods, while her acute awareness of media production and

alternative channels of distribution would eventually find its way into her first feature film, *Fresh Kill* (1995), and subsequent works.

Fresh Kill, a post-apocalyptic feature comedy co-written with author and poet Jessica Hagedorn, revolves around individuals inadvertently getting caught up in the global circulation of toxic waste, and their quest to unravel a deep-seated transnational conspiracy. In the film, a multinational corporation named GX imports raw materials from the Third World and dumps the toxic waste in the outer boroughs of New York City. As the fluorescent green substance makes its way into the food chain, from tinned cat food to high-end sushi restaurants, it prompts the film's host of multiracial characters to fight the spread of "environmental racism." Filmed in Staten Island (the title refers to the borough's notorious landfill), the movie depicts the pervasiveness of junk in the world, from the mountain of TVs and electronic detritus in the opening scene, to fish being contaminated by nuclear waste off the shore of Taiwan's Orchid Island. It also extends metaphorically to marginalized communities who are discarded by society.

The teasing opening catchphrase "Turn me on and tune me in," used in media-activist Mimi's talk show in the film, underscores how Cheang implicates the body in technological apparatuses and communication networks. As GX's insidious slogan ("We Care"), absurdist cat food commercials, public access channels and imagery of a hacker's terminal are all abruptly cut together, the screen is depicted as a central nodal point for both corporate propaganda-making and collective resistance, connecting the peripheral status of both Orchid Island's aboriginal inhabitants to Staten Island's activists, locating them in a global network of reciprocal exchange and ecological transformation.

The environmental degradation in *Fresh Kill* is tinted by racist stereotyping, classism and colonial legacies, and corresponds to the struggles that Cheang experienced as she transitioned from being in the privileged majority in Taiwan, to suddenly being a minority in the United States. In 1990, at the Whitney Museum of American Art, she displayed a work titled *Color Schemes* (1989), for which she recorded 12 performers describing racial discrimination in the entertainment industry, placing the videos inside washing machines to metaphorically invoke the processes of "white washing," "color washing" and, by extension, cultural assimilation. Though the 1990s in the US witnessed the height of the discourse around "multiculturalism"—which was adopted to varying degrees at the institutional and individual level to explicitly redress long-standing inequities in the arts, symbolically culminating in Daniel J. Martinez's controversial admission stub "I Can't Imagine Ever Wanting to Be White" for the 1993 Whitney Biennial—Cheang explained that living in New York made her very aware of the rampant exoticization and orientalization of Asian female bodies. In her contribution to

the 1993 Biennial, she presented the installation *Those Fluttering Objects of Desire*, which recreated coin-operated porno booths, except she displayed 25 women's experiences with interracial, lesbian and heterosexual encounters. As the images and audio had to be physically activated by the viewer inserting a coin, the piece underscores a collective voyeurism, framing sexual desire as shifting and evasive.

The Transgender Body-Machine Interface
The internet—what most would characterize as the foundation of Cheang's practice—carries different connotations depending on one's level of access to it. Yet Cheang was not formally introduced to the net until after making *Fresh Kill*. Although she describes herself as a "high-tech aborigine," Cheang also suggests that despite an intense desire to access technology and bandwidth, she doesn't own it. For her, to engage with the medium meant configuring and rerouting resources to individuals and locales that didn't necessarily have it.

Cheang thoroughly aligns herself with cyberfeminism, a loosely organized movement consisting of feminists who sought to challenge the hegemonic structures of the net and media dissemination, or the "technologically complex territories [that have been] . . . overcoded to a mythic degree as a male domain," as fellow cyberfeminist Faith Wilding has described it. Cyberfeminists attempted to enact change, using emails, online forums and listservs to disclose critical information, to collectivize and mobilize.

In a commission by Japan's NTT InterCommunication Center (ICC), Cheang explored the issue of accessibility in the project *Buy One Get One* (1997). In an era where people made personal homepages with repeating images—dubbed "wallpaper," to invoke the comfort of home and belonging—Cheang appealed to the commercial underpinnings of the popular sales promotion "buy one get one free" to grant internet access to areas deprived of it. She set up a suitcase shaped like a bento box that housed a computer in the ICC gallery, and she traveled with a second of these "digital suitcases" to 15 countries in Asia and Africa with collaborator Lawrence Chua. Wherever she went, she made what she called "homeless pages" for those with no web access, simultaneously uploading these designs onto the ICC homepage, giving people an online landing page of their own. As she explained to me: "That seamlessness between physical space and cyberspace was a fantasy back then—you didn't simply just jump on. Therefore, we had to be very attentive in making physical interfaces to meaningfully interact with the public."

Cheang's borrowing of technologies testifies to certain guerilla tactics outlined in Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* (1985), lauded in the 1990s as a handbook that collapsed temporalities, science-fiction and reality, artificial machines and organic bodies, and for transcending Western dualisms between mind and body, animal and machine, idealism and materialism. Haraway suggests that the cyborg figure can be invoked to point toward "transgressed boundaries, potent fusions and dangerous possibilities"—a central strategy for cyberfeminists in their mission to dismantle what they called the "daddy-mainframe" of a male-dominated, military-industrial data environment.

Even though Haraway did not specifically designate transgenderism as cyborgian, the transgender person—aided by prostheses, hormonal interventions and machinic extensions—is nevertheless able to reconfigure pre-given anatomical forms and disrupt gendered binaries. Cheang elaborated on that potential in an ambitious web project developed in 1998, titled *Brandon*, after the sensationalized account of the brutal rape and murder in 1993 of transgender teen Brandon Teena in Nebraska after Teena was discovered to have female genitalia. In the same year, the *Village Voice* published Julian Dibbell's article on a salacious act of "cyberrape," which outlined how a "voodoo doll" sub-program imposed sexual actions and speech acts upon players in a multiuser dungeon (MUD) computer game named LambdaMOO. Struck by cross-overs between the media coverage of the violence committed against Brandon Teena

and social repercussions for cyber communities, Cheang set up a combination of online and offline media spaces, interwoven with add-ons, plugins and pop-up windows, to unravel invisible constructs of gender, sexuality and legality.

To early net-art practitioners, the nonlinear format of hypertext was seen as a potentially liberating or "deterritorializing" force, capable of disrupting hierarchical or dominant narratives. In *Brandon*, what Cheang called the "bigdoll interface" consists of a grid of images that revealed itself with the user's mouseover—anatomy charts, strap-on dildos and BDSM gear—according Teena a fluid, amorphous digital portrait. Another segment, the "roadtrip interface," imagines Teena "cruising" an animated highway populated with icons culled from the history of sexuality, such as Venus Xtravaganza, a transgender performer featured in the 1990 documentary *Paris Is Burning*; Herculine Barbin, a 19th-century intersex person; and James McHarris, a Mississippi transgender man who was forced to strip in front of his town after being arrested in 1954.

This period of net-art witnessed heated debates over the virtual realm's possibilities for self-invention. While the platform LambdaMOO allowed users to customize their avatars and virtual geography, carving out room for cross-dressing, fantasy and role-play, incidents such as the cyber-rape demonstrate how the burgeoning net replicated preexisting societal prejudices and forms of violence. And while *Brandon*'s imagined road-trip realizes the fantasy of a transient person traversing the web, the user's navigation is also designed to be interrupted by the "panopticon interface" and "theatricum anatomicum." The former, based on Jeremy Bentham's concept for a building whose occupants were under constant surveillance, appears in *Brandon* as a virtual prison conceived to house sexual deviants; the latter references public amphitheaters used for anatomical presentations in 16th-century Europe.

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BUY ONE GET ONE, 1997, mixed-media installation, dimensions variable.

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Installation view of **BRANDON**, 1998–99, interactive networked code (html, Java, Javascript and server database), dimensions variable, at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum SoHo, New York, 1998.

In the *History of Sexuality* (1976), Michel Foucault defines modern sexuality as a discursive regime in which pleasure, perversion and scientific language became intertwined for the exercise of power: through legally enforced penances and extracted confessions, sex had to be "pursued down to their slenderest ramifications." As perceived sexual deviancy became wrapped up in practices of crime and punishment, their respective cases highlighted Western society's collective obsession with the "baring" of biologically imbued genders. In invoking institutional structures that established a specific economy in which bodies and knowledge circulated, *Brandon* invites the viewer to navigate the body's docility and mutability within our contemporary society of control, which at the time was also extending to the internet.

Digital Commons and Open Bandwidths
By the early 2000s, the techno-utopianism that characterized the internet's nascent stages could no longer hold up against the co-optation of public data and open-source software by nation-states and multinational conglomerates. Just as cyberpunk attempted to debunk the seamless articulation between human and machine, Cheang's critical engagements turned toward global capitalism, mapping out alternative modes of economic exchange and the distribution and ownership of communally oriented informational resources.

Co-produced with New York-based nonprofit Creative Time, *Garlic=Rich Air* (2002–03) is a prime example of the various interactive online projects that Cheang realized during this period. She imagined a postcapitalist society in the year 2030 after the global economy has collapsed, where organic garlic has taken over as the de facto social currency. The work establishes a relationship of exchange; users could participate online by submitting URL addresses—packets of information—in return for virtual garlic, whose value was collectively determined. The physical aspect of these exchanges was "performed" by way of a bright-orange pickup truck adorned with the slogan "Get Garlic / Go Wireless." Hooked up to wireless connectivity, the truck served as a vehicle for a local barter-based microeconomy,

traveling between Manhattan's farmer's markets, the Stock Exchange and a farmer in upstate New York, as virtual "G"s were cashed in for real ones. Passersby were also encouraged to trade in a pair of shoes, a poem or even a couple of cigars for fresh produce.

At the same time, Cheang also became involved in various initiatives that negotiated intellectual property in the public realm. *Kingdom of Piracy* (2003), for example, championed the free sharing of digital content by encouraging users to upload their own private data to be tracked, processed and broadcast. The project website was forcibly taken offline by Taiwan's Acer Digital Art Center, which had commissioned the piece but later deemed the title of the project too risqué in light of a major anti-piracy campaign. Far from being an isolated incident, this episode calls to mind the controversial website, the Pirate Bay, founded in the same year by Swedish think tank Piratbyrån and which facilitated peer-to-peer media sharing via BitTorrent. Its founders famously stood trial in 2009 and were jailed for copyright infringement.

Forgoing government-issued money and based on mutual trust and radical decentralization, *Garlic=Rich Air* was intentionally styled after the real-world example of El Club del Trueque. During Argentina's credit crisis in the '90s, coupons and barter-style clubs served as means to upkeep an alternative exchange economy. While garlic may seem farfetched as a universal currency, the work made the socioeconomic and ecological consequences of an impending catastrophe very tangible. Simultaneously foreboding and optimistic, both of Cheang's projects were invested in prototyping emergent strategies for adaptation in the face of climate change and economic precarity, soliciting public participation via virtual and physical exchange—however simulative or short-lived they may have been.

Viral Contamination and Post-Porn

In his essay "The Ecstasy of Communication" (1987), philosopher Jean Baudrillard lamented that our prior ways of identifying with the world—objects, signs and meanings—have been supplanted by "a screen and network"; the fetishization of the object and social alienation have given way to "pure interaction"—an ecstatic, operational state of being. As a result, Baudrillard posited, everything becomes subject to a viral contamination, in which public and private spheres merge to create a promiscuous mode of communication. Above all, Baudrillard suggested that an originary, organic body existed before the intervention of technological mediation.

The works that Cheang has created sought to overturn the notion of an organic body, to portray a contaminated, transparent, hyperreal state-of-being, as evinced in the artist's orchestration of disjointed narratives, stylized performances and hallucinogenic editing style. The body is shown to be none other than the original prosthesis we learn to manipulate in the first place. That perspective came to the fore in *I.K.U.* (2000), an orgiastic sci-fi drama and illegitimate spin-off on the movie *Blade Runner* (1982), which takes a fragmented, cyclical form that mirrors contemporary experiences of online porn and media-saturated environments. The work originated from Cheang's experimentations within the Japanese queer community and the Japanese adult video industry, which censors genital areas by blocking them with mosaic grids. In the film, the fictive Genom Corporation sends out an army of shape-shifting female replicants to collect, transmit and upload "orgasmic data" across a futuristic "New Tokyo" as they engage in scenes of sexual intercourse against a freeway, strip club, sushi bar and a parking lot. These encounters aim to accumulate data for the mass production of sex pills, which are sold in vending machines, allowing users to experience contactless orgasms. A pun on 行く ("iku"), a Japanese slang word used to express the act of "coming," the film enacts a simulated fantasy that advertises smooth orgasmic release without the physical friction that normally accompanies the sexual act. Additionally, Cheang explains, the "repeating sex scenes in different situations" invariably reflects the structure of the internet, which "takes people everywhere they want in the world just by entering the address of a website."

Even though *I.K.U.* replicates certain aspects of our virtual experience, it also challenges dominant codes underlying consumerist and heteronormative representations of bodies and pleasure. One set of remarkable imagery recurs throughout the replicants' cycles of missions. As the camera switches to an internal view of the body, the coder's arm mutates into a dildo-like extension and repeatedly extracts sexual data, not quite as phallocentric as much as it is mechanical. Digitally animated, the freaky dildo-arm displaces the male-centric view dominating commercial porn, hinting at a transgender reconfiguration of the body. In talking about the film, Cheang has identified with the term "post-porn," which encompasses those who approach sex as an emancipatory tool and emerged partly as a backlash against white feminism's disavowal of pornography. The viral promiscuity that so repelled Baudrillard can equally be turned into a generative force for extreme intimacy and kinship.

If technology was previously understood as a temporary interface between bodily organs and machines, biotechnology has enabled a paradigmatic shift, whereby cloning experiments and genetic modification are transforming the entire human configuration from the inside out. For Cheang, the present day is more dictated by "the multiplication of bodies through biotechnology and data," than "prostheses and machines," which is a historic by-product of the 1990s. Whereas *I.K.U.* is situated at the cusp of these two epistemological modes, her later works are more committed to navigating regimes of biopower.

Forming a trilogy with *I.K.U., UKI* (2009–) and the feature-length *FLUIDØ* (2017) pursue two lines of inquiry pivotal to Cheang's current practice—post-porn performance and viral contamination. *UKI Virus Rising*, *UKI*'s most recent iteration, was shown at the 2018 Gwangju Biennale. Bathed in a blood-red light, engorged, pulsating red cells are projected on the floor, as animated figures roam about in a 3D-generated, e-trash-filled landscape screened on the wall. In the installation's narrative, replacing physical sex pills, red blood cells have been usurped by the Genom Corp as the vessel carrying genetically encoded orgasmic data. Made obsolete, the discarded IKU replicants emerge as a virus in the bio-net to destroy the corporate
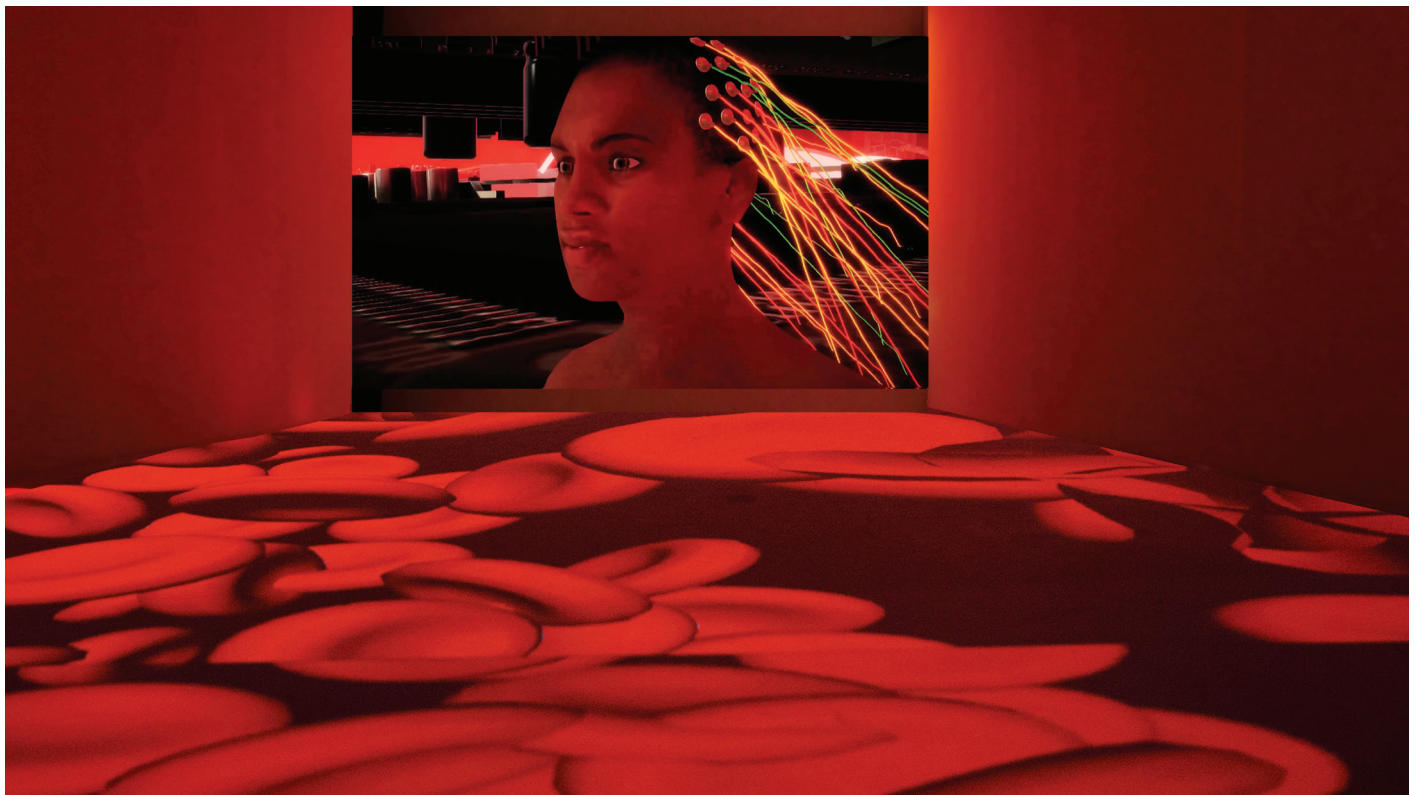
enterprise, much like Cheang's regular cast of marginalized characters in past works.

In contrast to her works with more analytical backdrops, the film *FLUIDØ* stands as an expressionist theatrical tableau upheld by a dominant political statement, and is considered by Cheang as a work of personal salvation. It is similarly set in the near future, where mutated AIDS viruses have given birth to ZERO GEN, human carriers of a new biodrug. As a new form of sexual commodity, this new drug diffuses through skin contact and creates an intoxicating high—what Cheang calls "the hyper narcotic for the 21st century"—becoming highly sought-after by drug dealers and government entities alike. In this scenario, bodies are colonized, engineered and reconstituted as biopolitical weapons, just like the way online marketing and surveillance algorithms mine, manipulate and produce subjects. Revolving around the struggle to gain control over the production and exploitation of bodily secretions, the film celebrates the unrestricted flow of body fluids through mesmerizing images of jubilant pissing contests, non-gender binary couplings and group pleasuring.

Though Cheang's collaboration with Delany didn't work out in 1998, *FLUIDØ* is specifically dedicated to the latter, as well as to

loved ones who had perished in the AIDs epidemic. Cheang states that "from the '80s onward, AIDS really changed our collective sexual perception, as it generated a lot of fear over the exchange of fluids between bodies. Yet Delany's books are all about that extreme indulgence and absolute abandonment." Taking Delany's themes on golden showers and queer vulnerability as guidance, the film injects a strong political incentive into pornography, exploring how the representation of unrestrained ejaculatory intimacy on screen can very much seep into real life. Here as elsewhere, Cheang's futuristic vision is activated by utopian yearnings to enact change. In opposition to the mode of instantaneous gratification and individualistic consumption dictated by commercial porn, works such as *I.K.U.* and *FLUIDØ* call for a "collective orgasm," which is to be located somewhere between libidinally connected bodies and the shared setting of public-screening spaces. In the ecstatic converging point between a viewer-consumer and mass-mediated images lies the potential for action, as the body constitutes both a *yielding* to and a *resistance from* changing instances of commodification and biopower.

For the Taiwan Pavilion at the upcoming 58th Venice Biennale, Cheang will be presenting *3x3x6*, a site-specific multimedia project that deals with contemporary forms of surveillance, control and incarceration, particularly as they relate to formations of sexual and racial norms. The work responds to the architectural and political history of the Palazzo delle Prigioni, a former prison, transforming it into an installation consisting of ten 4K films. Each composite portrait on screen is based on collaborative research that Cheang conducted with academics and activists into cases of imprisonment revolving around sexual-racial offenses, as Casanova, the Marquis de Sade, Foucault and various other 20th-century sexual archetypes traverse playful, fluid frameworks untethered from time, culture and reality. The project picks up where *Brandon* left off almost 20 years ago, but with a distinctly different set of preoccupations. The palace's central tower is hooked up to a surround surveillance system that scans visitors' faces, downloads them to a biopolitical database, and later integrates the new data to be projected onto the same panopticon surface as the established deviants. As the show's curator Paul B. Preciado states, despite the intensification, horizontalization and decentralization of digital surveillance regimes, *3x3x6* also opens room for "an inverted surveillance move, one in which the users become agents watching the regime's eye." The body is docile in that it is always governed, broken down and categorized according to coded definitions of gender, sexuality and race, but through the deconstructed misuse of technologies, it can also be hacked, remixed and re-projected as resistant tools for solidarity and affirmation. ✴