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Shu Lea Cheang

Viral Love

Cyberfeminist pioneer, post-porn filmmaker, video-game hacker, the Taiwanese-born artist Shu Lea Cheang has been deconstructing the patriarchy's puerile fantasies since the 1970s. Her work submerges desire and its commercialised expenditure back into the murky soup of sexuality from which they come. In her videos, installations, and net art projects, there are the scattered ephemera of peepshows and discarded computers, disassembled in order to cobble together a new body from the waste of the web.

By
Banyi Huang

There is something about bodily fluids in artist-filmmaker Shu Lea Cheang's multimedia universe, from the toxic, slimy residue clinging to fish scales in an early film *Fresh Kill* (1994), to cum forcibly extracted from oppressed bodies in her 2017 feature production *FLUIDO*, and most recently, the viscous stream of red blood cells that act as the backdrop for the installation *UKI Yurus Rising* (2018–). Not only can bodily fluids signify circulatory jubilation and sexual empowerment, they can also be harvested for ominous, administrative ends. This ever-present duality of meanings and uses is a red thread running through Cheang's works – a dialectical push-pull between consumption and desire, techno-capitalist oppression and the liberatory potential of libidinally-networked queerness.

Having moved to New York from Taiwan to study film in the 1970s, Cheang immersed herself in the downtown performance and grassroots media scene, and went clubbing at the Pyramid in the East Village. She was a first-generation member of Paper Tiger Television Collective, who produced low-budget, guerilla-style programmes for public access TV, with the goal of deconstructing commercial television as both institution and ideology. A photo taken on the set of Paper Tiger Productions shows Cheang holding up a mic, as a

colleague points the probing lens of a DV camera towards a corner on a model of Earth, while another inserts his finger in the shot for special effect. It is illustrative of the group's collaborative nature and improvisatory style, sowing the seeds for Cheang's lifelong preoccupation with processes of refutation: consumer capitalism's attempt to commodify and control bodies.

Cheang has worked in a dizzyingly-wide variety of mediums, traversing net art, installation, cinema, post-porn, viral performance, architectural intervention, trans punk fiction, and mobile games. Each genre, increasingly self-defining, flexes out the way that technological interfaces both extend the body beyond its gendered and racialised shell, and simultaneously reify it to ever-greater categorisation and control. One central question propels the conceptualisation and process of all her projects: how does the marginalised body survive to pleasure itself and others, in a system that continues to break it down and reconstitute it?

Amidst the height of multiculturalist discourse in the early 90s, Cheang created a series of installations that combined video with display apparatuses that functioned as metaphors for mechanisms of racial assimilation and scism. With *Those Fluttering Objects of Desire* (1992–93), Cheang wanted



Photos: Jackie Baier

FLUIDO, 2017, Film, 81 min.



FLUIDO, 2017, Film, 81 min.

Coded into the control and oppression of queer bodies is the inevitability of multiplication, viralisation, and potential insurgence.



Photo: Lona Fonte

Fresh Kill, 1994. Film, 80 min.

to push back against the rampant exoticization of female bodies, by appropriating peep-show porno booths as a display format. These coin-operated displays, complete with telephone audio, recounted twenty-five women artists' intimate narratives about interracial relationships, sexual appetite, and motherhood. Each video could only be activated with the viewer's participation, implicating the given peeper within the apparatus of the male gaze, revealing the imbrications of sexuality and intersectionality.

As the net and media landscape evolved in the 90s, the language that Cheang used to describe her position in relation to technology's particularly revealing. In interviews and statements from this period, she coined "high-tech aborigine", "digital nomad", and "cyber homesteader" as nomads for herself. The distribution of resources between centre and periphery highlights how the burgeoning web was subject equally to forces of colonisation and homogenisation. As a result, web tenants with no ownership had to stake out alternative ways of existing and connecting to one another, on a terrain held hostage by the military-corporate-white-male-industrial-complex. Cyberterminism, a loosely organised group of theorists, activists, and artists, came together to contest the hegemonic structures underlying the net, by distributing disruptive messages in listservs and billboards. "Who has access to the Big

Daddy Mainframe?" Perhaps most well-known is Australian media art collective VNS Matrix, who in their "Cyberterminist Manifesto for the 21st Century" (1991), proposed that "the modern cunt ... the clitoris is a direct line to the matrix." Despite their emphatic claims, the collective continued to perpetuate "central core imagery", celebrating vaginal iconography in a way that often excluded LGBTQ+ people.

Cheang navigated this problematic by staying on the periphery, calling herself a "closed cyberterminist" to elude some critical distance. In 1998, she was commissioned by the Guggenheim Museum to create *Brandon*, a one-year web project, and the first net-based artwork in the museum's collection. At the time, the media was saturated with the murder case of Brandon Teena, a Nebraska trans man who was brutally assaulted and killed in 1993. Throughout the murder trial and related news coverage was the misattribution of Teena's gender, insidiously invoking a charge of "deception" in order to criminalise and discriminate against trans people. Even *Boys Don't Cry* (released in 1998, starring Hilary Swank as the shy yet charismatic Teena), heralded as a breakthrough moment for trans representation in mainstream Hollywood, created a spectacle around Teena's "masquerade as a man".

In an effort to explore the mutually-constitutive crises of sexuality and legality, a number of artists, writers, and

institutions collaborated on the project over its year-long duration. Together, they designed interfaces, add-ons, plugins, and texts, layering the malleable skins of the internet to craft what the artist called the "ever-recombinant digi-social body". With each mouseover on the landing page, images were pulled from a database – female anatomical diagrams, strap-ons, salacious news headlines – in order to paint a fluid, composite figure that literally unravels any attempt to stabilise representation. One of the embedded hypertexts takes users to a mobile highway populated with animated GIFs, JavaScript, and pop-up windows, showing canonical figures from the history of sexuality, with references to lambdadaMOO, a text-based multiplayer game that allowed for gender roleplay and sexual non-conformity, including fictionalised stories involving Teena. For example, Venus Xiravagnaz's desire to be "a rich, spoiled, white girl", mingles with the 1954 headline "courtroom striptease bares true sex of Mississippi male", and a text adventure where players can choose "Sprink" as their gender. These pop-up windows juxtapose the historical-social obsession with biologically-determined genders, together with fantasies of a transient, queer cruising cyberspace. Additional interfaces were also set up to link to events taking place in collaborating institutions, such as a courtroom drama at Harvard's Ames Court, and an installa-

tion based on European anatomical theatres in Amsterdam.

If *Brandon* is a hyperlinked aggregate of the technical, juridical, and discursive apparatuses surrounding the construction of gender, 3x3x6 (2019), with which Cheang represented Taiwan at the 2019 Venice Biennale, further delves into the total convergence of sexuality, surveillance, and criminality through immersive architectural theatre. Curated by Paul B. Preciado, the sprawling installation was located across four rooms at the Palazzo delle Prigioni, a former prison. In ten monitors dispersed in two of the galleries, performers re-enacted a historical or contemporary figure who had been imprisoned for acts of gender or sexual dissent. A surveillance tower stood at the centre of one of the rooms, connected to a 3D camera surveillance system that collected data from visitors' faces at the entrance and fed them into a large database.

Fictionalised portraits in 3x3x6 include Casanova X, based on libertine writer Giacomo Casanova (1724–98), who was briefly imprisoned in Venice for sexual indecency, and later escaped. Sporting his iconic turtle-neck sweater and speedos, Foucault X works up a sweat fisting his lover on a SM swing, all the while going an impassioned lecture on sexual subjugation. Woman BX, after cutting off her husband's genitalia, demonstrates how to make a penis cake in her kitchen. Both her

Courtesy of Whitney Museum of American Art



Those Flattering Objects of Desire, Installation view, Whitney Biennale, 1993



Courtesy of the artist

00 X (from the film series for the installation 3x3x6), 2019, 4K video, 10:00 min.

manner of dress and domestic backdrop intentionally borrow from Chanel Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), a seminal feminist film that meticulously details the mundane routines of a middle-aged housewife. Cheang's trans punk re-enactments, invoking an orgy of stylised intertextual references, exhibits a playfulness and eroticism that warp chronological time and sexual norms. It finds parallels in how technologies of control can be revealed, frustrated, and subverted. In the fourth room at the former prison, visitors were exposed to the apparatuses of surveillance technology, as data collected from the duration of the exhibition, when fed through gender and racial morphing algorithms, became queer digital strategies to disrupt techniques of identification.

In the late 90s, when Cheang was experimenting with short sex videos in the Japanese queer community, she was approached by producer Takashi Asai to make a porno. She eventually settled on *L&L* (2000), an illegitimate spinoff on Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982). In lieu of Scott's slow-boiling, humanistic questions, *L&L* is inspired by the fast-paced, cyclical structure of online porn, presenting a fragmented viewing experience that is not unlike entering different URLs, and then being repeatedly taken variously to sex scenes in a parking lot, a sushi bar, and by a freeway. In these fragments, we travel with reshaping replicants, all named Reiko, as they are dispatched by a large corporation to collect, transmit, and upload "organic data" across the urban architecture of Tokyo. Amidst moans and flowing juices, the accumulated data is made into L&L chips and sold in vending machines, advertising the smooth promise of instant jouissance.

Across science-fiction and pop culture,

"techno-orientalism" is defined as the imagination of Asia in hyperfuturist terms – the gritty, neon, cyberpunk backstreets of *Blade Runner*'s Los Angeles, complemented by the depiction of Asians in unthinking, robotic manners. The trope reflects the West's deep-seated anxiety about East Asia's technological ascent, its "hard-core." To this, critic Dawn Chan asks: "Is it possible for Asian artists to recast techno-dictated trappings toward more generative ends?" *L&L* cannibalises the plotlines of *Blade Runner*, casting black trans performer Zachary Nard as an unauthorised Agent Deckard, who rectifies dialogue from the original film as he goes down on Reiko. "Do you love me? Do you trust me?"

Furthermore, Cheang's adaptation incorporates dominant codes of representation in Japanese adult videos as a jumping off point for a transgendered reconfiguration of the body. As the camera switches to a captivating, internal view of the vagina, the replicant's arm mutates into a fleshy dildo-like extension, repeatedly penetrating the subject to extract organic data. In *Elements of a Philosophy of Technology* (1877), media theorist Ernst Kapp mapped out early manifestations of a cybernetic paradigm, applying his notion of "organ projection" to the relationship between the body and the material world – the axe externalises the arm, the telegraphic system mirrors the neural network. Does the morphing dildo-arm in *L&L*, then, extend the body beyond its biological gender constraints? A trans appendage?

Since 2009, Cheang has been working on different iterations of *L&L*, as a sequel to *L&L*. Various media formats, spanning live performances and game installations that use bio-sensors, are conceived as sketches in the long process of planning this feature film. In the most recent version entitled

Virus Becoming (2021), installed at the Musée d'arts asiatiques in Nice, Cheang explores the backdrop of this universe even further with a giant 3D printed red pill, a series of tongue-in-cheek commercials that ideologically reinforce an overarching corporation's bio-infiltration scheme, as well as a three-channel installation named *L&L Virus Rising*. Reiko the replicant, made redundant from the sex data trade, was dumped in a 3D-modelled trashscape strewn with computer hardware. Stumbling between motherboards and hard drives, she eventually breaks free from electronic tentacles attempting to restrain her, spins into a frenzied cycle of self-encoding, and proceeds to virally infect all the hardware components. *L&L* inserts not only *L&L*'s letters, but also the latter's sole preoccupation with sex. Perhaps Deckard's sweet whispers have resurfaced, prompting Reiko to question what

exists beyond the realm of machink sex. As an ontologically ambiguous entity, the virus has been invariably inscribed with tropes of invasion as well as resistance, both materially and metaphorically. Taking place simultaneously at the microbiological, social, and systemic levels, viral infections present a fertile ground on which to explore dialectical tensions between state control and politically-motivated bodies and those in search of recuperating a sense of agency.

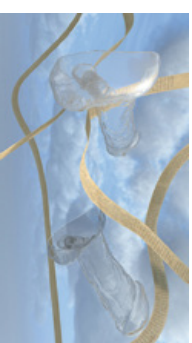
At the cusp of institutional recognition in the early 2000s, Cheang left a rapidly gentrifying New York for Europe, where she currently resides in between biennials, residences, and bio-hackathons. Coinciding with that move is a tectonic shift in technology's relationship to the body, particularly the way control is enacted. From *Brannon* to 3x3x6, *L&L*, to *L&L*, prostheses and appendages are replaced by the bio-technical



MW X (from the film series for the installation 3x3x6), 2019, 4K video, 10:00 min.



CASANOVA X (from the film series for the installation 3x3x6), 2019, 4K video, 10:00 min.



SADE X (from the film series for the installation 3x3x6), 2019, 4K video, 10:00 min.



L/KJ, A skin viral ALI-reality cinema in development, 2009–2023

reconfiguration of the body in its entirety. The phantasmagorical ideology of big television, and the liberatory potential of the World Wide Web, have now been subsumed under the big-data-pharma industry: the temporary interface between body and screen is now a permanent chip embedded in the skin, and would eventually evolve into microbial mutations within the body.

It is impossible to talk about biopolitics and viral contagion without addressing the collective experience of the AIDS epidemic and its aftermath. In 1981, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) released an initial report, generating a fear over bodily fluids and their transmission. Political indifference and misinformation generated a widespread hysteria over gay bodies as a source of deadly contagion. For Cheang, the co-mingling textures of bodily fluids, coupled with cruising, public sex, and other forms of sexual transgression, not only harken back to the pre-AIDS period of sexual liberation, but also memorialise the loss of many of her comrades.

Cheang considers *FLUIDO*, a feature film produced in 2017, to be a work of personal salvation. The film imagines a future scenario, where ZERO GENs, as carriers of a mutated HIV, have evolved to produce bodily fluids that can generate an addictive high. The non-linear plot follows Natasha, a government agent dispatched to arrest these mutant individuals,

as she infiltrates a drug ring, and participates in BDSM sessions that begin to wear down her boundaries. The film is punctuated by the choreography of bodily secretions: code hackers ecstatically spraying piss on the wall to practice cryptography, a line of ZERO GENs masturbating in front of urinals, their precious semen extracted by the drug lord, and Natasha accidentally glitching to discover the addictive thrills of bodily-liquid high.

Few authors can claim to have depicted sex with such graphic and indulgent transgression as science fiction writer Samuel Delany. Cheang cites Delany's novel *Hogg* (1994) as a major influence, during a time when the legacy of AIDS still stigmatised bodily intimacy, and along with it, the vulnerability of queer desire. Using pornography as a format, *Hogg* follows a twelve-year-old narrator as he engages in acts of incest, paedophilia, scatophilia, and other modes of sexual sadism. The sheer evocation of smell, the brutality of touch, the incessant transgression of fluids, whether cum, urine, or blood, occur fundamentally at the bodily level, rendering the line between pleasure and repulsion ultimately illusory. According to fellow writer J.G. Ballard, the medium of pornography in Delany's work is the "most political form of fiction, dealing with how we use and exploit each other."

In *FLUIDO*, pornography functions in part as a means to propel the plot forward, but it also serves as a political statement about cycles of oppression and resistance. A moment of heated sex and tenderness occurs between two ZERO GEN lovers, as they hold each other longingly, their genitals covered by cabbage leaves. This inverts the infamous rose petal scene from *American Beauty* (1999), where the straight male fantasy for pubescent bodies directs the camera's gaze. This moment of intimacy is again shadowed by commodification and exploitation: neatly packaged into a jar is a luxurious face cream extracted from yet another line-up of bodies, by stroking spliced clittors.

At the heart of Cheang's polymorphous universe are a host of marginalised characters, from the discarded *L/KJ*

replicants that launch themselves into viruses to those incarcerated for being sexual deviants. Coded into the control and oppression of queer bodies is the inevitability of multiplication, vitalisation, and potential insurgence. Effectuating a viral love that ripples across networked communities, the open, fluid exploration of sex and sexuality creates a ballast against the restless waters of bio-technological encroachments on bodily agency. In the age of Covid-19, Cheang's works have unparalleled implications for our relationship to bodily fluids, biometric tracking, and the demarcation of otherness. Between a red blood cell pill for instant orgasm, and a jar of cum cream for an intoxicating high, which one would you choose?



L/KJ, 2000, Film, 90 min.

SHU LEA CHEANG was born in 1954 in Taiwan. She lives in Paris. Recent exhibitions have taken place at Musée des Arts Asiatiques, Nice; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (both 2021); The Centre Pompidou, Paris (2020); The 58th Venice Biennale; The Performa 19 Biennial (both 2019); and The Guangju Biennale (2018).

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