

US\$ 10 S\$ 15 € 8 £ 5 AU\$ 15 NZ\$ 17.50 HK\$ 110 NT\$ 390 RM 35 Rp 95.000 THB 395 Php 500

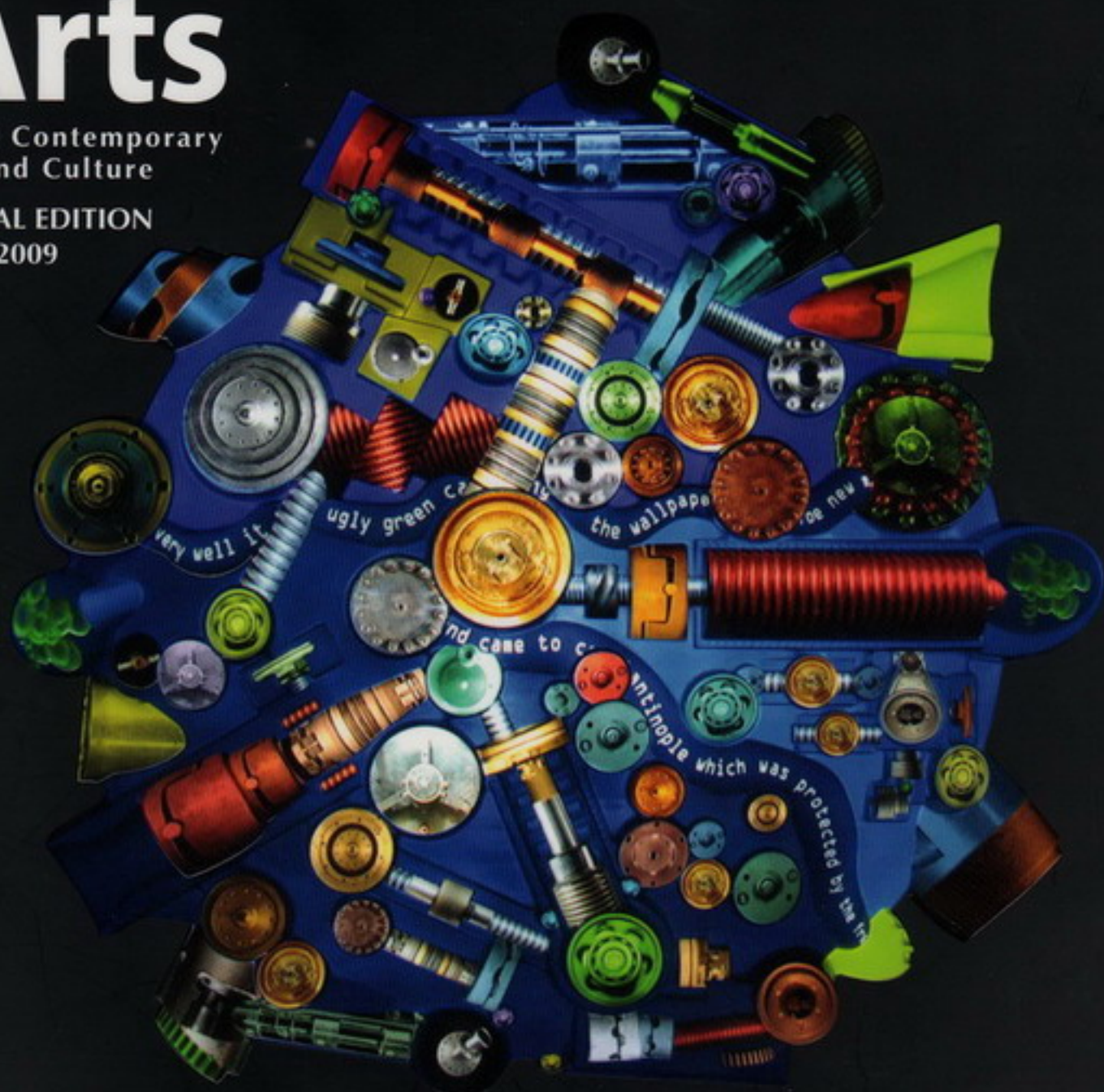


# 10 Point of View Tips to Overcome The Financial Crisis

## Arts

Asian Contemporary  
Art and Culture

SPECIAL EDITION  
2008/2009



ACAF 08 New York  
Jakarta Biennale  
Sherman Foundation

Ay Tjoe Christine - Chang Chien-Chi - Dolorosa Sinaga  
Melati Suryodarmo - Patricia Eustaguio - Yoko Ono

SPECIAL EDITION



99



Courtesy of China Town series © Chien-Chi Chang



*It has been 14 years – almost her entire life time – since this young woman has seen her father, Fuzhou, 2007*

## Chang Chien-Chi

# “DOUBLENESS”

Iola Lenzi

Singapore’s reputation as a regional hub for photography is increasingly merited. After several ineffective years the six-year-old spring-time Month of Photography (MOP) now seems firmly rooted, and the new biennial Singapore International Photography Festival (SIPF), organised at Mount Sophia’s Old School venue by a dynamic cooperative of artists led by Gwen Lee, shows promise after its impressive October 2008 debut.

The National Museum of Singapore, with its natural affinity for photography and film as documentary tools indispensable for the telling of history, has now also joined the fray, inaugurating an international photography festival this autumn. For its maiden *Season of Photography*, the National Museum presented several high-caliber manifestations, three big shows from two continents marking the

October 2008 premiere: the first, a retrospective of black and white and color images, as well as film, by the Mexican master Pedro Meyer; the second featuring recent video portraits by the mythic American choreographer and multi-disciplinary artist Robert Wilson; and the third, a tightly curated show of work by Taiwanese Magnum photographer Chang Chien-Chi.

The latter, titled “Doubleteness: Photography of Chang Chien-Chi”, was the most visually and emotionally powerful of the three exhibitions and presenting work by an Asian practitioner, in the context of Singapore, possessed a particular resonance.

Photography and art photography are often thought to be one and the same. Yet they are worlds apart. This is not to say however that photo-



Courtesy of China Town series © Chien-Chi Chang

▲  
A newly arrived immigrant eats noodles on a fire escape, New York City, USA, 1998

journalism can not be art, and conversely, that photography purporting to be art always gets away with its labeling. For audiences ambushed on a daily basis by imagery, a large part of which photographic imagery, the confusion is not surprising. In view of the documentary nature of photography, and the medium's banality as a tool of mass communication, the discussion of art photography inevitably involves negotiating the fluid and ill-defined boundaries separating art – the photographer's contribution of an intangible *something* to the picture he frames-, from mere information, the cliché as surface representation. Chang Chien-Chi, like so many photographic artists, began his career as a photo-journalist. For him however no cross-over was ever necessary, art – a part of himself- was in his shots from the beginning.

Put together by Chang in close collaboration with National Museum of Singapore curator Wong Hwei Lian, "Doubleness" assembles three of the photographer's most celebrated thematic series in the artist's first solo survey exhibition outside his native Taiwan. Hung in the museum's cavernous basement gallery, the show projects a hushed, hermetic quality that has as much to do with the work's focused emotional register as its underground setting. Three highly distinct sets of images are spotlighted.

The first, encountered as one enters the gallery, is *Double Happiness* (2003-2005), a 66-photograph narrative sweep shot in black and white documenting a Hanoi marriage-arrangement business that orchestrates matrimonial union between men from developed-nation Taiwan, and women from developing Vietnam. The piece is sociological in flavor, its examination of the rich world/poor world dichotomy something of a photojournalistic standard. Yet beyond social commentary, the series presents a subtly layered array of emotional and human subtexts – fear, disappointment, curiosity, ambition, frailty, absurdity, despair, abandonment-. Unseen, but palpatingly alive, these radiate outward to envelop their audience. They have not just been captured by Chang but felt, sensed at the core, and so artfully conveyed to the viewer who, through Chang's lens, is simultaneously thrown into the role of apprehensive bride and dubious groom. *Double Happiness* is unlike so many photographic essays that in merely documenting human or natural travesties, presume to assume the status of art. Here instead, by sharing his highly personal understanding of these men and women's tentative dance with fate, Chang communicates a deeply felt pathos for both the protagonists and their incongruous situation, so indisputably creating a unique work of art beyond surface description.



◀ Couples present proof of identity and marriage so that the women can get visas to Taiwan, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, 2003



◀ Recruited by marriage brokers, young Vietnamese women are viewed by Taiwanese men who – for a price – can pick and wed them within a few days, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, 2003

*Double Happiness* is thematically and visually powerful. With their display, Wong and Chang have gone a step further, opting, perhaps a little too literally, to underscore the series' material reference to automated assembly-line production. Instead of being shown hanging on the wall, the images are presented face up, aligned on a waist-high shelf. The viewer thus finds himself peering down at them as he would at a conveyor belt trundling the manufactured, packaged product out at regular intervals. Ultimately however the conceit is of little importance, the images and their bitter-sweet pitch graven indelibly in the mind long after one has forgotten the specifics of the display.

More potent still is Chang's spectacular 1998 *The Chain*. D deservedly iconic, the internationally shown and acclaimed series records mental patients interned in a Taiwanese asylum that though known as the Long Fa Tang Buddhist temple, has little to do with a religious institution. The 45 black and white prints are nearly human in scale and portraying the exclusively male patients in pairs, bound together by an iron chain, are iconographically arresting even before one delves into their expressive singularity.

The succession of images is visually intense, Chang using formal repetition to effect, his frontally-shot subjects all adopting more or less the same standing pose, all similarly dressed. At first glance the study explores only the small variations of posture and expression afforded by the limited confines of a life lived in chains. A strange transcendence lies under the series' surface however, Chang's essay of universal resonance as it portrays the tension and deft balance that exist between dependence and power, love and hate, trust and distrust, connection and alienation as embodied by all these couples. Indeed, it is the familiarity and candor of these men's faces, even with their half-dazed, sometimes crazed expressions, that strike a chord, making the work achingly, exquisitely beautiful. No one sensitive to life and its deeper meaning can fail to be moved by *The Chain* and Chang and Wong's oppressive installation of the piece, in a closed, deliberately claustrophobic darkened square space, the images squashed up against each other, is curatorially masterful, serving to heighten its impact.

The show's third work, *China Town*, shot in colour and black and white, tells the story of economic migration from the perspective of both the immigrants, and those left behind in China's Fujian



Courtesy of the Chain series © Chien-Chi Chang



Courtesy of the Chain series © Chien-Chi Chang

▲ *Mental patients at Long Fa Tang Temple, Kaohsiung, Taiwan, 1998*

province. The family men who move from impoverished rural China to New York City’s shabby China Town assume poorly paid blue collar jobs. Sending their salary home, Chang shows them living in harsh material and emotional conditions, deprived as they are of wife and children. Economic migration is a common theme in Asia and indeed Singaporeans seeing *China Town* can not fail to be reminded of the fact that the island-state’s economic expansion of the last decades owes a considerable debt to imported regional manual labor, living in conditions similar to those experienced by Chang’s New-York-based Fujianese. Shot over a sixteen-year period—from the early 1990’s when Chang was living in the United States, until now—this is a tender work, the images, particularly the earlier black and white New York ones, drawing the viewer into the workers’ harsh reality with a combination of intimacy and an elegantly seductive play of planes, perspectives and frame-cuts. Never sentimental or voyeuristic, Chang’s two-sided vision *China Town*, though shot at close emotional and physical range, with Chang as insider rather than outsider, succeeds, paradoxically, for the psychological space and dignity it accords its subjects.

▲ *Mental patients at Long Fa Tang Temple, Kaohsiung, Taiwan, 1998*

“Doubleness”, Magnum photographer Chang Chien-Chi’s first survey exhibition outside Taiwan, is an important exhibition. With this manifestation alone, the National Museum of Singapore’s new *Season of Photography* is off to an excellent start, making a significant contribution to Asian photography on our continent and beyond.

“Doubleness: Photography of Chang Chien-Chi”  
National Museum of Singapore  
10 October 2008 – 4 January 2009 🇸🇬

---

Iola Lenzi is a Singapore-based critic and curator specializing in Southeast Asian contemporary art

---