

Luke Ching *Glitch in the Matrix*

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Detailed installation view of LUKE CHING's "Glitch in the Matrix," at Para Site, Hong Kong, 2021.
Photo by Samson Cheung Choi Sang.
Courtesy Para Site.

Visitors to Luke Ching's solo exhibition at Para Site were immediately confronted with an unusual demand. Stood at the center of the entrance was a yellow sign asking audiences to "Take off your left shoe upon entry (Please leave it on the carpet)." There was nothing to justify the bizarre instruction; one was simply left to decide whether to obey or ignore it. I chose to heed the artist's behest since I was a guest at his presentation, and spent the rest of my visit awkwardly walking about. The sign turned out to be a fitting introduction to a group of installations and videos that drew attention to what Ching calls the "totalitarian time-spaces" in our everyday lives. At our jobs, for example, we conform to our employers' regulations, whether or not they are reasoned, just as, while looking at art in a cultural venue, we comply with certain codes of conduct. As "Glitch in the Matrix" underscored, the danger is that, after a while, these rules are ingrained as indisputable norms.

Encapsulating how time can naturalize unjust occupational

conditions was *Man Without Safety Belt* (2015). Sprawled face-down on the ground was a mannequin modeled on a disturbing exhibit at the Hong Kong Science Museum where the figure falls to his death whenever someone triggers a sensor. His repeated demise is portrayed as a foregone conclusion of his lack of appropriate equipment; he didn't follow the rules, and death is the only possible consequence. *Man Without Safety Belt* challenges repetition's naturalizing function by extracting the mannequin from the Museum's looped sequence, rendering it instead as part of a frozen moment: next to the body on the floor was a stack of voided time cards, around which Ching had drawn a trompe l'oeil shadow using a pencil. Besides recalling the graphite still lifes elsewhere in the show, the motionless scene brought to mind critic Walter Benjamin's concepts of *Stillstellung* (zero-hour), an interruption of a mechanical process, and *Jetzeit* (now-time), a reminder that in each present, there lies the potential to rupture the smooth continuum of history.

The keyword is "potential," however. The source of the exhibition's tension and strength was its insistence at every turn that viewers consciously position themselves. As much as the objects preserved in sketches and clocks fixed at six could be taken as subversive disruptions in mechanical time, they could also conjure time as a prison. Indeed, the *Still Life* (2020) series depicts the basic items that detainees at the Castle Peak Bay Immigration Centre

are allowed to possess, such as toothpaste and soap. For these people awaiting deportation with no timeline in sight, the present can be agonizing. Ching himself described the process of creating these images rather pessimistically as "letting time slip away under abstinence." A similar duality underpins the video *A Moment* (2014), which captures the lowering of the China and Hong Kong flags at seven dispersed governmental buildings in one take. The ritual was supposed to be performed at the different facilities at six in the evening, but clearly, the official clocks were not synced. Is this a glitch in time-space through which we can escape our current reality, or merely a sign that affirms we are trapped in an incessant circuit?

Another query was spelled out in the middle of the exhibition with wooden letters: "Yes"/"No." The mysterious options correspond to *Face Shift* (2020), stacks of lenticular prints of the artist's ID photo, in which he is deliberately contorting his face. By nodding or shaking their heads, viewers see the image's two aspects. There is no neutral perspective. "Yes" or "No" determines what is in front of your eyes. This stayed with me as I exited the show. Right by the bank of elevators, I noticed *Election Machine* (2020). The final choice that visitors were given was a false one: the vending contraption offered just one type of beverage. The question was: will you accept this, yes or no?

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