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Chien-Chi Chang: The Chain

53 pages, foldout. ISBN 0-9542079-5-5

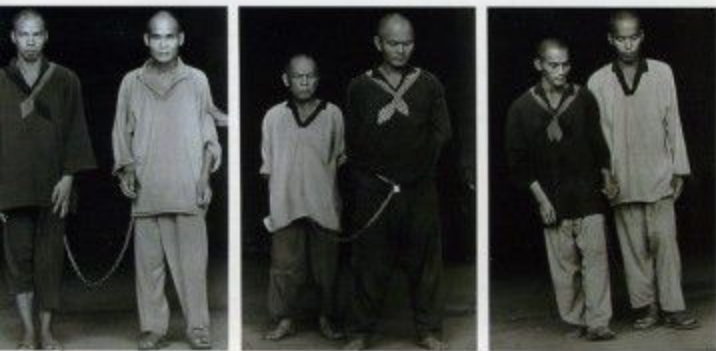
Trolley Ltd., London 2002

Sad brides and regretful grooms. Chained Taiwanese elephants hungry for freedom and illegal Taiwanese immigrants hungry for the American Dream. Welcome to the world of Chien-Chi Chang – Magnum photographer, visual poet and social commentator. Himself a Taiwanese in New York for 15 years, Chang knows about cultural alienation. As his latest work *The Chain* would suggest, the 42-year old photographer knows a little bit about restriction as well. Instead of newly-weds, elephants and immigrants, *The Chain* features portraits of mental patients living under inhuman conditions in a Taiwanese institution. The 47 black and white photographs depict what seems the physical manifestation of imprisonment and mutual dependency. Tied together in pairs, the photographic subjects look desolate or happy, sad or numb, melancholic or crazy in their limited world. With iron chains tying them together as recurring central feature, the theme of physical restriction is evi-

photographic experience memorable.

In 1993, Chang began visiting the mental care institution Lung Fa Tang in Southern Taiwan, and he was appalled and fascinated by what he encountered there. For thirty years, the institution has functioned as a hybrid of Buddhist temple, chicken farm and mental institution, and despite hefty criticism of its treatment methods by the medical establishment and the media, still more families send their mentally unstable relatives to receive the unorthodox therapy consisting not of medicine but hard work and 'chains of compassion'. Currently there are about 600 patients, all chained in pairs at all times during the day, alone only when sleeping. In 1993, Chang took his first frames and found that he had captured in the portraits 'truth', 'all the information, the emotion'. He continued to visit the place on a regular basis, taking the last photographs in 1999.

Without the contextual ambition of the humanitarian photographer in mind, the album is just a string of portraits of people wearing dirty clothes and chains, making funny faces at the man behind the camera – Magnum Photogra-



dent. The figures all look somewhat similar – victims, it would seem, of human standardisation and depersonalisation. The faces and gestures give hints at differences in personality, mood and mental condition, and the sores and the dirt reveal – apart from lousy sanitary conditions – individual personal problems and behavioural peculiarities. One has wet his pants. One has psoriasis. One has a thing for rolling up one trouser leg and leaving the other down. Sad and symbolical – but initially not too intriguing. As the pages turn, the longing for a new angle and a bit of visual creativity grows. It is melodramatically obvious what Chang wants to show. Supposedly, everybody can relate to being chained to people, things and places. Sometimes enjoyably so, most often not. Symbolism is certainly not dead, but when too obvious, it is fatiguing. In the case of *The Chain*, it is the context that makes the

photographer or not. However, considering Chang's art as photojournalism fuelled by social involvement, *The Chain* is certainly worth a look. The Chain has been exhibited at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum and La Biennale di Venezia (2002) and at the Bienal de São Paulo (2002).

Ari Versluis & Ellie Uytenbroek: Exactitudes

128 pages, hardcover. ISBN 90-6450-455-5
010 Publishers, Rotterdam 2002.

Since October 1994, the Dutch, Rotterdam-based photographer Ari Versluis and stylist Ellie Uytenbroek have worked towards the creation of a colourful landscape of sub-cultural stereotypes now published under the title *Exactitudes*. Eight years on its way, the collection romanticizes the notions of individ-

uality and conformity. In a smash of colours, people and socio-cultural fashion constructs are presented as interchangeable symptoms of time and trend. The title of the work is emblematic of the 'mix and match' culture it attempts to document in an almost anthropological manner: 'Exact' and 'attitudes' become *Exactitudes* – and post-modern bricolage identity constructs gasp for air.

The semi-documentary is, however, successful. The 58 illustrations, consisting each (but one) of 12 portraits, bear titles that categorize and classify the subjects photographed and give food for thoughts. One page is dedicated to 'The Girls from Ipanema – Rio de Janeiro 2000'. Their twelve portraits reveal middle aged, suntanned women in beach wear, fighting the laws of nature – and gravity. Another is dedicated to 'Ghoullies – Rotterdam 2002'. Here, twelve Goth chicks occupy the page with their black corsets, pancake powder and severe attitudes. Moving from 'Skins' in Rotterdam to bare-chested 'Gentlemen' in Rio de Janeiro – from 'Chairmen' in Beijing to 'Vagabonds' and 'Allah's Girls' in Rotterdam – the collection takes the spectator on a journey through styles and cultures that thrive or fade out in the years around the millennium. The morale seems to be that any individual attempt to break free from the main stream is futile, as even rebels have subcategories of their own. The only flaw of the collection must be that it does not reassure the spectator of his own uniqueness in this respect.

Jannie Uhre Mogensen