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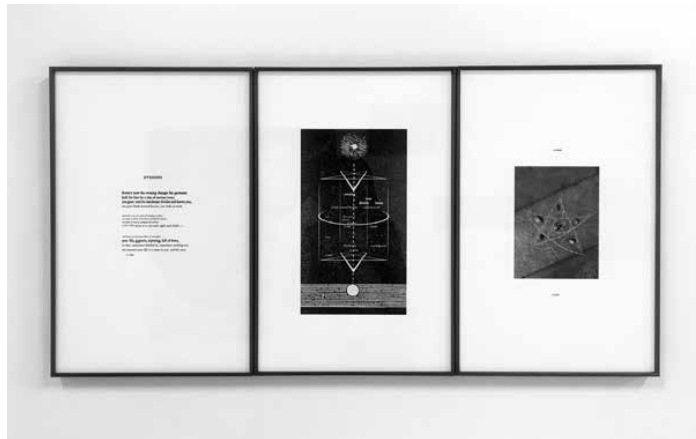
Self-Archivization: Chen Zhe's *Towards Evening: Six Chapters*



Chen Zhe, *Towards Evening: Six Chapters*, 2017, installation view, *Any Ball*, Central Academy of Fine Art Museum, Beijing. Courtesy of the artist.

Why is the twilight hour so enchanting, and how does it enchant humans across time and space? At the most recent display of *Towards Evening: Six Chapters* 向晚六章 (2012–), in the group exhibition *Any Ball*, held at the Art Museum, Central Academy of Fine Art, Beijing (April 8–May 3, 2017), Chen Zhe erected two large quadrilateral panels joined at a corner on which she pinned photographs, postcards, notes, and sketches from her ongoing study of images and texts addressing the psychological, emotional, and poetic experiences shared by human beings when looking at the skyline at dusk. The third rendition of this evolving project in a group exhibition, this installation featured pictorial and textual materials, both old and new, gathered and edited by the artist. Placed on the floor at the foot of the installation was one of the earliest works completed for this project: a triptych consisting of a print of Rainer Maria Rilke's (1875–1926) poem "Abend" (Evening) (1895), a diagram illustrating the verses, and a photograph inspired by the poem. The prints pinned onto the panels contain some materials that have been newly added to the collection. Considering the increasing interest in Aby Warburg's (1866–1929) *Mnemosyne Atlas* (1924–29), stimulated by a series of symposia and workshops on him held in Beijing over the past three years, it is perhaps no accident that Chen Zhe chose this specific Warburgian

Chen Zhe, *untitled*, 2016.
Courtesy of the artist.



Aby Warburg, *Picture Atlas Mnemosyne*, Panel 46, 1928/29; © The Warburg Institute.



format to present the atlas of her images and texts, staging the gathered materials as exteriorized manifestations of her internal thinking.¹ Referring to this installation as “a recent restoration of the process of art making on-site,” Chen Zhe affirms the unfinished status of *Towards Evening* and the construction of the exhibition site as a reproduction of the artist’s studio.² More importantly, she signals the dual function of the displayed images and texts as not only intermediaries within an unfinished work of art but also documentation of the development of her thought processes.

Born in 1989, Chen Zhe studied and lived in Beijing and Los Angeles, and she is of the youngest generation of urban Chinese artists who received elite liberal arts education in both China and the U.S.³ They learned ancient Chinese history and literature along with the basics of Western classics through school curricula and were simultaneously exposed to contemporary Euro-American music, performance, and Japanese youth subcultures in their teenage years. Reading widely and writing bilingually, they actively participated in online communications with friends of mixed cultural backgrounds in virtual and social networking communities like *douban*, discussing issues in arts and literature freely and rigorously.

In her previous projects *Bees* (2010–12) and *The Bearable* (2007–10), Chen Zhe explored her personal discomforts and adolescent tensions through photographing peers with the same “disquieted souls” and “wounded bodies” as hers.⁴ Chen Zhe read the diaries written by her subjects alongside a wide range of introspective texts, including works by Virgil (70–19 BCE), Derek Jarman’s (1842–1994) poems, and Andrew Solomon’s (1963–) self-analysis of depression, and she shared her understanding of these writings with friends through exhibiting the photographs of herself and her peers and publishing the images and the letters between them in the artist’s book.⁵ The current project, *Towards Evening*, whose peaceful and beautiful theme stands in stark contrast to the “darkness” of the two previous projects, nonetheless involves a similar effort in attempting to preserve and display the pictorial and textual materials that record the growth of the project and by doing so, to resonate with viewers through a cross-cultural self-reflection. Jianying Zha (1959–), the well-known diaspora writer from an older generation, once described herself as having “one foot in China, one foot in America,” remarking that her head was “somewhere in between, probably resting in Hong Kong.”⁶ But perhaps for Chen Zhe and her peers, their inquiry is no longer about seeking a concrete foothold to bridge the crevice between cultures; instead, it is more about finding common ground in art and literature that similar minds—Chinese and foreign—can reach across.

Chen Zhe’s bilingual competence as an insider to other languages enables her to engage with the nuances embedded in words and, at the same time, to collate the inspiring and enlightening parallels between languages as a translator or mediator. The title *Towards Evening* comes from the opening line of the Tang poet Li Shangyin’s (813–858) well-known five-character quatrain *Lo-yu yüan* 登樂遊原 (translated also as *Sunset*):

Towards evening my soul was disquieted,
And I urged my carriage up to this ancient plateau.
The setting sun has boundless beauty;
Only the yellow dusk is so near.⁷

Finding herself confused, as well as captivated, by the sunset and that nebulous space between day and night, around 2012 Chen Zhe started to photograph miscellaneous scenes that reminded her of such feelings about twilight. The earliest works include an intimate shot of white

Chen Zhe, *untitled*, 2012.
Courtesy of the artist.



bedsheets and curtains cast in golden light, a picture of curved stairs with geometric shadows, and a close-up photograph of a spider's web. Starting with the photographic images, she soon expanded her research toward a semantic exploration of the concept

of twilight itself. Intrigued by the overlapping implications of the term across languages, she sought to unearth the psychological foundations of the “uneasiness” one feels when experiencing this transient and magical moment of the day. Li Shangyin’s verse is merely an ancient prompt conveying psychological uneasiness at dusk. According to Chen Zhe’s research, in Edo folklore, the twilight hour is referred to as “the moment encountered by demons” or “the moment when a great misfortune comes,” as demons and ghosts that begin to haunt when darkness falls. In French, it is referred as *l’heure entre chien et loup*, meaning the hour of the day when the light is so dim that one can’t distinguish a dog from a wolf. Chen Zhe teases out these echoes of “twilight” across languages and visualizes their subtle meanings through various visual media. For example, she overlaid illustrations from Toriyama Sekien’s (1712–88) *Illustrated One Hundred Demons from the Present and the Past* (c. 1779) with digital images of dusk she photographed, and then she printed the sandwiched image onto a plastic sheet.⁸ In another sketch, she conceived an installation with the two words “dog” and “wolf” projected onto each other in a reference to the French idiom. Most recently, the two words were presented through inlaid colour pebbles on a piece of terrazzo, with one overlaid onto the other, mimicking the look of plates used in a colour blindness test. In her work, twilight, with its shared reverberations across vocabularies, becomes the liminal, the threshold between security and danger, hope and fear, freedom and belonging, the known and the unknown.⁹

Chen Zhe, installation view,
“SNACKS,” Power Station
of Art, Shanghai, July 2016.
Courtesy of the artist.



Chen Zhe’s process of materializing an atlas of the textual and pictorial resources on twilight has developed over time. In the beginning, she framed her photographs and notes, arranging them in a row, and hung them



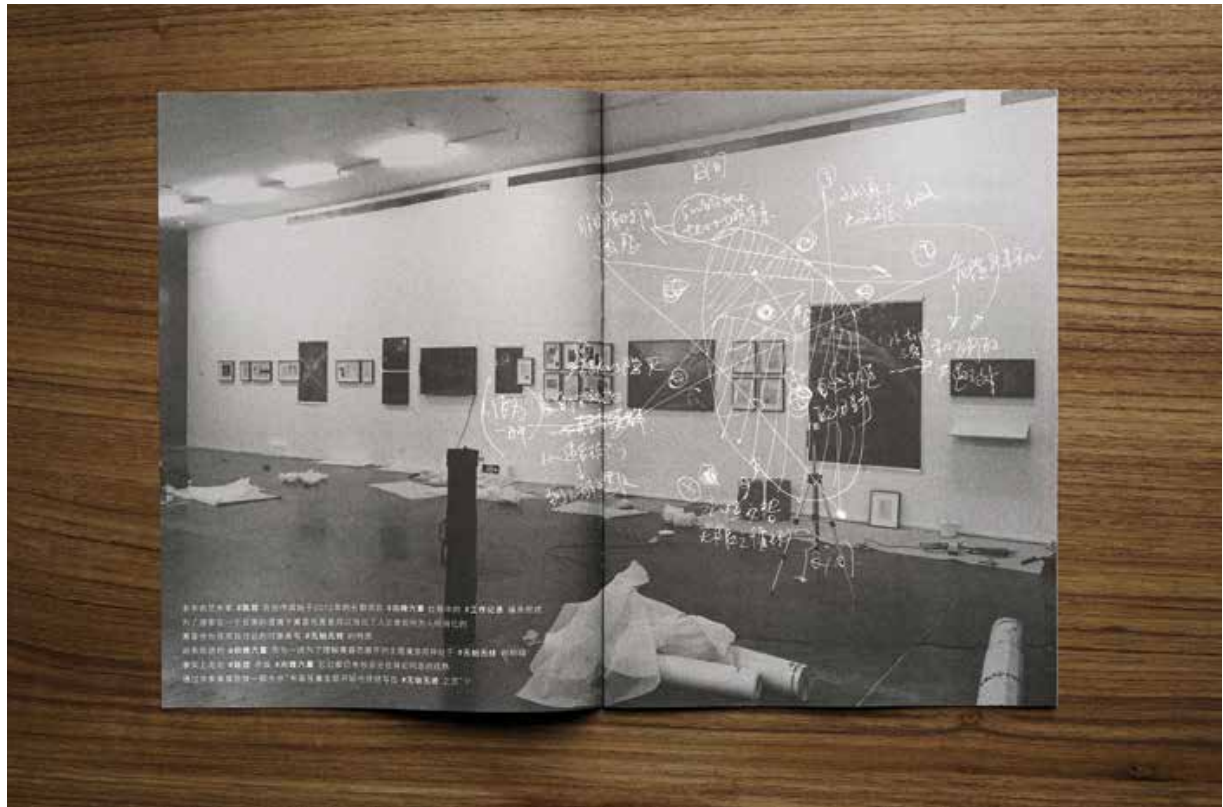
Chen Zhe, installation view, "Linguistic Pavilion," Minsheng Art Museum, Shanghai, January 2016. Courtesy of the artist.

on the gallery walls in the group exhibition *Linguistic Pavilion* (January 9–March 13, 2016), held at the Minsheng Art Museum, Shanghai.¹⁰ Yet she soon realized that this traditional way of making and staging images and texts was too neat and tidy to provoke the discourse about twilight that she had expected, so she abandoned this approach and switched to a broader methodology of searching for imagery and literature that would be evocative of our intricate experiences of this transient moment of the day. Chen Zhe has gathered all kinds of texts—poems, novels, scientific reports—that address the uncanny and psychological magic of nightfall, augmented by different technical definitions of the term. She then juxtaposed the texts with diagrams, images of historic art works, snapshots of her everyday life, and images from Flickr—all relating to the sky at dusk—encouraging the viewer to synthesize them into a new awareness of the end of day. In the group exhibition *SNACKS* (July 16–October 16, 2016), at the Power Station of Art in Shanghai, she discarded the standard models of exhibiting images and texts on the wall and instead laid her images, plans, and documents flat on a large table in imitation of the work table in her studio. The printed plastic sheet with Sekien's illustration was hung on a large piece of glass erected at the central axis of the table. This new way of presenting *Towards Evening* implied the openness of the project, the day-to-day accumulation of her thoughts, and the complex interwoven relationships among the materials on display. As the forerunner of the panels installed in *Any Ball* at CAFA, this installation announced and highlighted Chen Zhe's changing identity from a picture maker attracted by twilight to a compiler and archivist of images and texts on twilight.

Most significantly, Chen Zhe, as the omnipotent producer of this archive, is not only often the maker of the pictures, but also a reviser or editor who builds connections among the images and texts and vice versa. To borrow from Jacques Derrida's description of Sigmund Freud's intimate relationship with archived materials in the emerging field of psychoanalysis, the formation of any archive requires an in-house authority wherein the archive is built and conserved.¹¹ This authority could be an individual or an institution. In the case of *Towards Evening*, Chen Zhe, the artist, works as the ultimate organizer and decipherer of her materials and is the principle driver in formulating the archive and assuring its possibilities of "memorization, repetition, reproduction, and of reimpresion," as described by Derrida.¹² As will be shown in the following examples, nearly all the

images and texts in *Towards Evening* underwent transformations through Chen Zhe's concentrated editing and revision. Instead of describing the collected materials as reproductions from various sources, we may have a better understanding of them if we view them as products that have undergone reshaping and reconfiguration. In other words, Chen Zhe precipitates the archival status of her work in the manner of Derrida's authorial archivist. Although sunset is a shared cultural memory and experience of all human beings, the collected images and texts on twilight are arranged purely within the context of Chen Zhe's personal experiences and perspectives.

Chen Zhe interlocks the grouped images and texts through their "intertextuality," a concept that she has elaborately articulated and that has been extensively addressed by other writers.¹³ However, aside from the connections between the pictorial and textual materials, there seems to have been a lack of critical awareness by the artist and other writers about how the cozy and "conspiratorial" (*gong mou*) relationship between the two—to use the artist's own words—was also achieved by constructing and deciphering the meanings of the work through the combination of the exhibition installations, printed brochures, and the artist's writing.¹⁴ To use the previously mentioned Rilke triptych as an example, Chen Zhe first selected her favorite lines from three English translations of Rilke's "Abend" to compose her own preferred version of the poem. The poem describes the sense of limbo inherent in the early evening sky, when the night "climbs towards heaven" and the day "sinks to earth."¹⁵ Chen Zhe revealed this process of refinement by displaying the three original versions of the poem on the large table installed in the *SNACKS* exhibition, and in the printout of the hybrid version of the poem, she deliberately marked in different fonts the lines that came from different sources. Chen Zhe then singled out the directional words, by circling them in red, from the verses that describe the rise of stars and the fall of night. She reproduced this marked poem on the cover page of the artist's pamphlet and later embedded these words into a diagram that she found in an online database. Alongside the hybrid poem and the annotated diagram, Chen Zhe added a photograph of small rocks that she saw kids place on the street one day on her way home. In his poem, Rilke wrote: "One moment your life is a stone in you, and the next, a star."¹⁶ From Chen Zhe's perspective, according to an interview, the stones and the kids' chalk drawing of a pentagram encircling the rocks echoed Rilke's depiction of the separation of the earth and sky at dusk.¹⁷ The picture stands as a symbol of the coexistence of the star and the stone, the high and the low, the transcendental and the everyday, in cosmos as well as in our body. On a double-page spread of the pamphlet, she superimposed upon the installation view of *Towards Evening* in *Linguistic Pavilion* the potential outline of the project. She also attached a paragraph to the bottom left corner of the page, explaining that the pamphlet was based on the documents used for the artist's work. The paragraph went on to state that both the twilight hour itself and the project *Towards Evening* were without a definitive beginning or end.¹⁸



Perhaps the entire composition of the Rilke triptych as a component of *Towards Evening* is not the framed triptych itself but a composite of the relevant citations accompanied by the artist's reflections in the format of sketches, comments, and notes, all of which are interwoven and deciphering each other. It is noteworthy that in both *SNACKS* and *Any Ball*, the referential images and texts were printed out and carefully presented next to the artist's sketches and notes. For example, in *SNACKS*, the photograph of the spiders together with the Rilke triptych were exhibited as printed documents laid flat on the large table, with an anthology of Rilke's poetry in its original book format placed alongside. These original and reproduced documents were treated equally as components within a larger ensemble of images and texts and functioned doubly as an archive on twilight as well as vehicles conveying their own stories.

Chen Zhe, pages from *SNACKS* (July 2016). Courtesy of the artist.

The idea of an archive functioning as the container of the artwork as well as the decipherer of the artwork's concepts is generally considered to have been initiated by Marcel Duchamp's (1887–1968) *Box in a Valise* (1935–41). As described by literary scholar Ernst Van Alphen in *Staging the Archive: Art and Photography in the Age of New Media*, Duchamp's notes in *Box* and his well-known installation *The Large Glass* (1915–23) are “the twin works of art.”¹⁹ The notes, sketches, and image references in the box materialize the original intentions of the artist; they also reveal Duchamp's own methodological trajectory of approaching the subject at hand. Meanwhile, the *Box* itself as a portable archive of the artist could be presented independently as a work of art. The images and texts on display, deciphering and being deciphered at the same time, function as “alternate articulations” of the same concepts and ideas of the artist. They are not complementary materials but “an extended portion of each other.”²⁰

Marcel Duchamp, *Box in a Valise (Boîte-en-valise)*, 1935–41 (1963 edition). Courtesy The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago, Gift of Mrs. Robert B. Mayer.



Towards Evening can be viewed as Chen Zhe's "box" for her works and thoughts. Combining the exhibited materials, the archived references, sketches from past exhibitions and plans for future works and exhibitions, the images and texts—that is, the artist's writing and picturing—also become an archive of the artist's archive on twilight. Meanwhile, the carefully arranged exhibition installations assist the viewer in imagining how the staged materials were originally archived in the artist's storage. In a nutshell, *Towards Evening* as an archive on twilight automatically records the evolution of the project, and it functions as documentation of the artist's thinking. It not only tells us why the twilight hour is so enchanting and how it captivates humans across space and time, but also records how an archive becomes itself: a process of *self-archivization*.

When will this project be finished, and what will be the final format of these gathered, edited, and created images and texts? Or, given that Chen Zhe had described twilight and *Towards Evening* as "beginning-less and endless," we may wonder whether there will be an end to the project after all.²¹ And how will the participation of other people in viewing and writing about this long-term project become internalized into this growing archive and become a part of it?

Chen Zhe has shared notes, sketches, and plans of *Towards Evening* with friends who are themselves artists, critics, or art historians. Sometimes e-mail messages or letters between the artist and friends exchanging ideas and references are also included in the exhibition pamphlet or become a part of the artwork. Both Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* and Duchamp's *Box in a Valise* presented their authors' thoughts as eloquent pictorial archives. In these two cases, however, external writings on the projects, outsiders to the works, were left out of the ever-changing respective projects. *Towards Evening*, in contrast, tries to absorb such writings—including those written by Chen Zhe as well as others—into the conceptualization of the project. On the one hand, the format and ideology of the archive, following Derrida's formulation, allows Chen Zhe to be the authorial archivist of *Towards Evening*. On the other hand, the openness of an archive has also disengaged the images and texts from the artist's administrative control and transformed *Towards Evening* into a product constructed by the collective intellect. The responses raised by the participating viewers, such as the

concept of “self-archivization” discussed in this essay, might have some influence on the artist’s work in the future.

Perhaps subversively, the format and ideology of Chen Ze’s archive also activate art historical writing—that is, this essay—to participate in the completion of an unfinished work of art. By doing so, it raises a question about the traditional relationship between picturing and writing in contemporary art. Chen Zhe as an artist becomes an archivist in making, displaying, and publishing her work, and the art historical writing on her archive is integrated into it as a living, ever-changing entity. Built on picturing and writing, *Towards Evening* transforms itself into a collective database that makes meaning of the world by Chen Zhe and the other participating minds. Maybe this new type of negotiation between images and words—with “word” in its significantly plural form—is another implementation of “intertextuality,” which as the key concept interlocking the images and texts in the project has been repeatedly emphasized by the artist.

Notes

1. The series of lectures and symposiums on Georges Didi-Huberman and Aby Warburg held at OCAT Beijing in 2014 and 2015 attracted the attention of many young artists locally.
2. See Chen Zhe’s exhibition label “Another Restoration of the Scene Making: *Towards Evening: Six Chapters*,” in *Any Ball*, Central Academy of Fine Art, Beijing, April 2017.
3. Regarding Chen Zhe’s early years at school, see Tingting Xu’s interview with the artist in Chen Zhe, *Bees* (Shanghai and Beijing: Geaugeste Gallery and Jiazazhi Press, 2010), 77–81.
4. Chen Zhe, description of *Bees & The Bearable*, <http://www.zheis.com/BEES-THE-BEARABLE-2016/>.
5. *The Bearable* and the preceding *Bees*, documenting Chen Zhe’s own experience of self-mutilation and her communication with the subjects, respectively, were treated as two separate projects at the beginning but combined into a whole when the works were completed. The documentary materials from the *Bees* were incorporated into the new compendium *Bees & The Bearable*, encompassing the snapshots from Chen Zhe’s daily life, photographs of her subjects, and the artist’s book recording the interactions between Chen Zhe and the participants. See Chen Zhe, artist statement, <http://www.zheis.com/BEES-THE-BEARABLE-2016/>.
6. Jianying Zha, “After an Icon,” in *China Pop: How Soap Operas, Tabloids, and Bestsellers Are Transforming a Culture* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 5.
7. A. R. Davis, trans., *A Book of Chinese Verse* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.), 134–35.
8. See the exhibition views in Chen Zhe, *Snacks* (Shanghai: Minsheng Art museum, 2016), 17–18.
9. The above descriptions are excerpted from Chen Zhe’s notes shared with the author, January–April, 2017.
10. Chen Zhe, *Snacks*, 2–3.
11. Derrida uses the term “archivization” to describe the formation of the archive and consider it as the very history of psychoanalysis. See Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression in Diacritics* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 1–6.
12. *Ibid.*, 11.
13. See Chen Zhe, “Searching in All Dimensions of Time—Case Studies on Combinations of Photography and Text,” *Art World Magazine*, no. 310 (August 2016), 84–96; and Hu Hao, “How to catch the spirit of twilight: An analysis of the narrative of *Toward Evening*,” June 2016, <http://vision.xitek.com/gallery/201603/07-194310.html/>.
14. Chen Zhe, “Searching in All Dimensions of Time,” 84–96.
15. See the three translations of Rilke’s *Abend* in C. F. MacIntyre, trans., *Selected Poems by Rainer Maria Rilke* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1940), 46–47; Edward Snow, trans., *The Poetry of Rilke* (New York: North Point Press, 2009), 99; and Robert Bly’s translation in Madge McKeithen, *Blue Peninsula: Essential Words for a Life of Loss and Change* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2006), 189.
16. See Robert Bly’s translation in *Blue Peninsula*, 189.
17. See Zhu Yinan’s interview with Chen Zhe, “Chen Zhe: A Song Towards Evening” in *Sheying Shijie*, No. 4 (2016), 118–124.
18. Chen Zhe, *Snacks*, 2–3.
19. Earnst Van Alphen, *Staging the Archive: Art and Photography in the Age of New Media* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014), 59.
20. *Ibid.*, 59, 172.
21. Chen Zhe, *Snacks*, 2–3.