

UKI Shu Lea Cheang

BERLIN FILM PREMIERE

Presented by LAS Art Foundation

About the artist

Shu Lea Cheang is an artist and filmmaker whose practice challenges existing structures and the boundaries imposed on individuals by society, geography, politics, and economies. Widely celebrated for her genre-bending contributions to queer cinema and media art, Cheang often employs science fiction to project new social norms and alternative imaginaries surrounding bodily agency and autonomy.

About LAS Art Foundation

LAS Art Foundation is a new type of arts organisation that interrogates our present and gives form to future imaginaries. Working with visionary artists and thinkers, they produce ground-breaking projects and experiences that explore the possibilities of tomorrow. Driven by curiosity, LAS and their collaborators investigate topics ranging from AI and quantum computing to ecology and interspecies relationships. With each endeavour, they nurture exchanges between art, science and technology, and reimagine the role of an arts organisation as one that shapes and evolves with our collective futures.



UKI was created with funding from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation and Medienboard Berlin Brandenburg.

STILL FROM UKI. © 2023 SHU LEA CHEANG

UKI – A Viral Sci-Fi Alt Reality Cinema

UKI is a sci-fi film that offers a timely look at how bodies are regulated, policed, optimised, and exploited. It interrogates bio-medical practices such as genetic engineering and data harvesting, as well as the effects of toxic waste pollution. Shu Lea Cheang draws inspiration from the recent Covid-19 pandemic, ongoing developments in the biotechnology industry, as well as her experiences living through the AIDS crisis in New York City during the 80s and 90s.

UKI centres around the nefarious dealings of GENOM Corp., a biotechnology company that created a biological internet called BioNet. GENOM's products work at the DNA level, altering users' genetic code to manipulate and exploit the population. The company collects intimate personal data, such as orgasm data, with the goal of developing new pharmaceuticals that turn sexual pleasure into a commodity.

'UKI responds to current advancement in bio-informatics, bio-engineering and mobile digital media. Research in genomics and synthetic biology remaps our body construct. Mobile phones with embedded sensors are our extended prostheses, tracking our geo-locations, body movements, border crossings, and personal bio-data. We are part of a meta-integrated network surveillance structure. How do we negotiate ourselves within these systems?'

- SHU LEA CHEANG

The film follows two parallel story lines. One takes place in a city besieged by a viral epidemic and social unrest. At a 24-hour diner where the infected congregate to exchange information and orgasm data, a group of people—activists, hackers, dissenters—traverse time and space, bringing news of protest and manifestation while uncovering GENOM's bio-engineering scheme. GENOM's BioNet promises to keep people safe from the virus and to heighten the pleasure of connecting with others, but all this comes at a price.

In a parallel world, we meet Reiko, a humanoid replicant created by GENOM to harvest orgasm data. No longer useful, GENOM dumps Reiko on the toxic landfill site E-Trashville. Encountering the various mutants, replicants, and transgenic creatures who live among the e-waste, Reiko undergoes a process of transformation. She tries to reboot her system but fails, instead re-emerging as the virus UKI. UKI the virus multiplies and returns to the city to take down GENOM Corp.

Cheang first started developing the storyline of GENOM Corp. and Reiko in her cyberpunk sci-fi porn film, *I.K.U.* (2000). Inspired by Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, she wanted to introduce queer narratives and sexuality into the sci-fi genre and, in doing so, helped invent queer sci-fi cinema.

While *UKI* features many scenes that echo the recent pandemic, Cheang began her research on viruses, bio-hacking, and the medical industrial complex more than 20 years ago. She refers to her films as "science made fiction" because they speculate on how scientific research happening today might impact communities in the not-so-distant future.



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Queer Imaginaries and Viral Becoming

Cheang often speaks about how she felt personally transformed by the AIDS virus – not on a physical level, but on a psychic one. The way the virus devastated the gay community, and the callous response from the government and pharmaceutical companies, made her reconsider body politics.

In Cheang's narrative, GENOM Corp.'s bio-engineered red blood cells and DNA sequencing produces glitches, giving rise to a new non-binary, gender-neutral human species. Reiko's viral becoming as UKI the virus carries with it the possibility for transfiguration. Learning to love the virus liberates us.

Cheang was inspired by the work of legendary biologist Lynn Margulis and her concept of symbiogenesis, which theorises that complex life forms on Earth evolved through a process of symbiotic mutation and gene transfer between formerly free-living single-celled organisms.

Symbiogenesis can be seen at work today in life forms such as lichen, a composite organism that arises from a mutualistic relationship between algae and fungi. Human beings are also understood as products of this process of infection, mutation, and co-evolution in the way our bodies are inextricably linked with the billions of bacteria who make up our microbiome and without whom essential bodily functions like digestion would not be possible.

'The potential of viral capacity in multiplying, propagating is immense. Consider UKI the virus as a self-motivated entity, she possesses the power to call for actions, to mobilise, to infiltrate, to subvert. Virus as dissidence, virus mutated within, virus becoming.'

- SHU LEA CHEANG



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Gender and Sexuality in an Era of Biocapitalism Your Pleasure. Our Business.

Cheang's work is also inspired by the writing of queer theorist Paul B. Preciado, with whom she collaborated on *3x3x6*, her mixed media installation at the 2019 Venice Biennale. In his 2008 book *Testo Junkie*, Preciado chronicles his own gender transition and critically explores how the advent and commercialisation of synthetic hormones has altered the course of biology, transforming gender, sex, sexuality, and sexual identity into objects of biocapitalism, surveillance, and political management.

In the world of *UKI*, these ideas are represented by the multinational corporation GENOM, whose biological network BioNet emerges as the dominant information system in the aftermath of the internet's collapse. GENOM uses bacteria as 'foreign agents' that penetrate the human body, spreading through red blood cells and reprogramming DNA to store and transfer data.

GENOM's service promises heightened pleasure and connection, enabling users to have sexual encounters with minimal physical interaction. By shaking hands, bacteria transfers across bodies, exchanging information and producing orgasms. GENOM harvests and collects this orgasm data to produce an oral pill called the Red Pill, which provides instant, enhanced climactic pleasure for consumption.

UKI thus wrestles with Preciado's central question: 'How did sex and sexuality become the main objects of political and economic activity?' The practice of moulding the body, sex, and sexuality in the laboratory is one that emerged in the 20th century, giving way to new ideas about 'normal' and 'deviant' sexual identities and paving the way for new industries dedicated to producing and controlling sexual subjectivities.



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Pollution, Mutation, and Transformation in E-Trashville

Half of *UKI*'s story takes place within the game engine-generated virtual world of E-Trashville, a giant landfill composed of obsolete, electronic waste. This is where GENOM dumps Reiko when she is deemed no longer useful.

The landfill is populated by labourers and migrants who scavenge the old motherboards, RAMs, CPUs and other outdated electronic parts for raw materials like copper and aluminium. All the while, the e-waste leaks toxins into the landscape and, over time, the pollution has produced a species of mutants and transgenic creatures who possess special powers.

Cheang locates E-Trashville deep on 'The Continent,' highlighting the way Western waste is outsourced to Africa and other places in the Global South, producing a new form of environmental colonialism that endangers the lives of marginalised peoples. Cheang has often critiqued the ways global capitalism produces social inequality and ecological damage. This was also a major plot point in her first feature film, *Fresh Kill* (1994), which similarly centres around landfill sites in the United States and Southeast Asia.

In UKI, the mutant inhabitants of E-Trashville ultimately exert their revenge by helping Reiko transform into the virus UKI. In her viral form, Reiko is able to infiltrate and take down the BioNet by producing glitches in GENOM's bio-engineered genetic codes.



Collaborative Media Production

Shu Lea Cheang has been exploring the narrative potential of new technology since the start of her artistic career, always operating with an open-source, DIY, and collaborative ethos.

While living in New York City in the 1980s, she was a member of Paper Tiger Television, a non-profit, low-budget public access television programme and open media collective founded to promote free speech, media literacy, and broader access to production tools. The collective's democratic, anti-commercial approach focused on demystifying technology and making the production process more transparent. This grassroots, community-oriented spirit has continued to define Cheang's artistic process.

For *UKI*, Cheang took a low-budget approach to motion capture and visual effects, working closely with VFX designer Gonzalo Martín Martín, 3D animator Roland Lauth and Unity artists Xiyue Hu and Xing Xiao to create the universe of BioNet and E-Trashville.

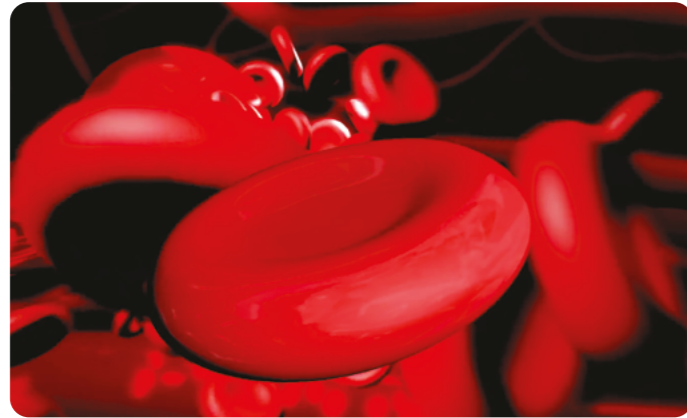
Using off-the-shelf commercial tools like Kinect cameras and iPads, they developed 3D avatars based on important members of Cheang's community like hacker Elektra Wagenrad, xenologist Adriana Knouf, and performance artist Liz Rosenfeld. Several E-Trashville scenes were even created through an open call casting and live motion capture performance that took place at the Shedhalle in Zurich, inviting the public to join the script reading and cinema-in-the-making.

For the Berlin premiere, Cheang has called on her large community of collaborators to bring the world of *UKI* to life through special performances and installations.

INSTALLATIONS

Blood Cell Dome Projection

GENOM's BioNet uses re-engineered red blood cells to modify human DNA for data storage and extraction. Projected onto the dome of Kranzler Eck, this blood cell bio-informatics network presides over the weekend's events.



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GENOM Ads

Located throughout the top floor, GENOM's advertisements (created by VFX designer Gonzalo Martín Martín) bombard visitors with marketing and promotional material to lure them onto the BioNet.



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Radio Antennas

Installed throughout the terrace by Cheang's collaborator, hacker and tech activist Elektra Wagenrad, four radio antennas transmit electromagnetic noise and sounds from FM broadcasts, nearby trains, and intercepted VHF/UHF and PSK31/RTTY radio frequencies. The sound installation pays homage to the hackers in *UKI* who use radio devices to access and transmit information about the virus and the ongoing civil unrest.



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PERFORMANCES

Handshake Performance

(FRIDAY, 21 JULY, 22:50-23:50)

Join the cast of *UKI* in a re-creation of the diner scene from the film. Following the screening, Anna, Dandy, Brooks, and Brad invite the public to join them in exchanging bio-data by shaking hands. Magic will be on hand to serve special Molotov Cocktails while sound artist Sky Deep remixes music and sound effects from the film.

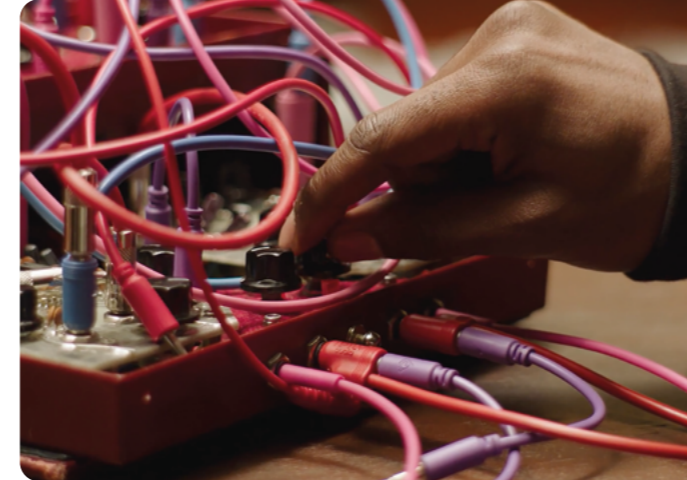


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Coquette by Ioana Vreme Moser

(FRIDAY, 21 JULY, 19:00-20:00 AND 22:50-23:50)

Ioana Vreme Moser's *Coquette* series appears in the film as radio transmitter devices used by the hackers to send and receive information and jam GENOM's digital advertisement screens. For *UKI*'s premiere, Moser will activate her original *Coquette* device in a special sound performance.



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The Last Neurone — Music Remix Night

(SATURDAY, 22 JULY, 23:00-5:12)

Music: Aérea Negrot with Royal Dust, Dennis Gundlach, Mieko Suzuki, Tobias Freund, Saint Precious, and Rey KM Domurat

Taking the original soundtrack from Shu Lea Cheang's *I.K.U.* (2000), produced by Takashi Asai of Uplink Co. (Tokyo) and performed by Hoppy Kamiyama & The SABOTEN, music producer Aérea Negrot has remixed the music for *UKI* with the help of Royal Dust and Dennis Gundlach. On Saturday, Aérea Negrot brings together a gang of geniuses for an all-night remix and live jam session derived from the music of *I.K.U.* and *UKI*.

Performer Mmakgosi Kgabi, who plays Ozone in *UKI*'s E-Trashville, will also perform live as her own transgenic avatar.

The evening ends at sunrise, 5:12am, with breakfast served on the terrace.



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Panel discussion

(FRIDAY, 21 JULY, 20:00-21:00)

On Friday night, Shu Lea Cheang will be joined in conversation by queer cultural theorist João Florêncio to speak about her practice and introduce the film. Florêncio is currently Senior Lecturer in History of Modern and Contemporary Art and Visual Culture at the University of Exeter, UK. From September 2023, he will be Professor of Gender Studies at Linköping University in Sweden, where he will chair a new research unit on "Sex Media, Sex Cultures." Florêncio is the author of *Bareback Porn, Porous Masculinities, Queer Futures: The Ethics of Becoming-Pig* (Routledge, 2020), and is currently co-writing an experimental autotheoretical book on queer cruising with Berlin-based artist Liz Rosenfeld, to be published by Rutgers University Press.

Acknowledgements

Concept and direction: Shu Lea Cheang

Producer: Jürgen Brüning
 Production manager: Alex Demetriou
 Radio antenna installation: Elektra Wagenrad
 Diner performers: Tyra Wigg, Asia-James Ryan Ryyves Thomas, Alan Chen, Jin, Bernard J. Butler
 Diner sound artist: Sky Deep
 Coquette performance: Ioana Vreme Moser
 Transgenic performance: Mmakgosi Kgabi
 VFX designer: Gonzalo Martín Martín
 Virtual universe production team: Roland Lauth, Xiyue Hu and Xing Xiao.
 'Last Neurone' sound artists: Aérea Negrot, Royal Dust, Mieko Suzuki, Dennis Gundlach, Saint Precious, Tobias Freund, and Rey KM Domurat with special guests
 Make-up: Nuria de Lario
 Photographer: J. Jackie Baier
 Costume designer: Alexis Mersmann

LAS

Director: Dr Bettina Kames
 Commercial Director: Kristina Leipold
 Curator: Julia Kaganskiy
 Curatorial Assistant: Zoe Büchtemann
 Head of Marketing and Communications: Felix Thon
 Communication Manager: Selin Şahin
 Social Media Manager: Veronica Jonsson

Production: Nok Akt
 Lead Producer: Henok Tsehaye
 Producer: Nina Reese
 Producer: Leander Kittelmann
 Producer: Elias Asisi

Expert Panellist: João Florêncio

Shu Lea Cheang



UKI