

CRISIS

Contemporary
Asian
Photography
Part I

亞洲當代
攝影展 Part I

YAO Jui-Chun
YANG Che-Yi
Yunyi LIU

姚瑞中
楊哲一
劉芸怡

OF NOW

Crisis of Now

By Chun-chi WANG

Contemporary Asian Photography is an exhibition series that takes a close look at contemporary culture and art practice from Asian artists' perspectives. The exhibitions concentrate on specific pieces of history and life experiences, but also attempt to construct or discover relationships between historical contexts from varied perspectives. Specifically, they make observations either from different geographical locations synchronously, or from the same location at different times. The personal experiences and collective consciousness are linked with multiple historical trajectories charted by the vicissitudinal political and social forces.

In *Crisis of Now* of this series we invited three Taiwanese artists—YAO Jui-Chung, YANG Che-Yi and Yunyi LIU—to present their contemporary photography through multi-cultural observations. Each of these projects demonstrates the persistent authority that photographers have always relied on—that a camera allows you to step into situations and take a look and also to step back, reflect and comment. The title of the exhibition is direct reference to the historical background, the turbulent political and social landscape of Asia in this timeframe. In recent years, Asia has not only arisen as an urgent geopolitical issue thanks to the wrestling among these historical driving forces, but has also become the gasoline and electricity by which the engine of capitalist market is powered for the process of neoliberal globalization. It has also served as a wrestling ring for different forces in international politics, which is by no means a result of historical contingency but a product in response to times of crisis.

YAO Jui-chung
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When the new semester began in February 2010, YAO Jui-chung, presiding over the first classes of the fine arts departments at Taipei National University of the Arts and the National Taiwan Normal University, asked the students about their expectations for this class: did they wish to follow the normal class format, where the teacher would teach relevant knowledge, or would they like to use the class to investigate “mosquito halls”? The fifty-some students at the two universities decided to make a Taiwan-wide “mosquito hall” survey as the assignment for the semester. Through half a

year of investigation across the island, the students identified 147 “mosquito hall” locations, compiling the 684-page book *Mirage—Disused Public Property in Taiwan*, which outlines an absurd situation in Taiwanese society: “misguided policy is worse than corruption.” Meanwhile, this artistic action was included in the 2010 Taipei Biennial Movement Project. It was widely reported in the media and attracted a high level of attention from the government, even prompting a call from the Vice President and a visit from the Premier of the Executive Yuan, who advised all the relevant departments to engage in an inspection of the listed facilities, ordering them to revive all the “mosquito halls” within a year or consider demolishing them. Through eight years of work, over 330 students and six books, this art action was like a stone thrown into a pond, sending ripples outwards, shaking a presumably calm society and forcing them to face reality. The significance and value of this “participation” lay in the fact that it is both a collective action by YAO and his students, and that it used artistic methods to hold a social issue up to scrutiny and engage people’s awareness.

YANG Che-Yi
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In his professional exploration and recording based on a scientific environmental study, YANG Che-Yi endows observed landscape with a tranquil and ethereal beauty through his poetic vision. The *Shan-Shui* (2005+) series documents the limestone mines of Taiwan-funded cement enterprises in China. The artist records gradual destruction and weakening of giant mountains caused by mechanical excavation, attesting to the fading of mountain forests under progressive ruination. The quiet mountainscape without a soul is, however, filled with traces of human invasion into nature, showing clear-cut traces, paths run through by excavation vehicles and haze composed of thick dust. YANG’s *Shan-Shui* represents a vision beyond concrete mountain while paying a negative homage to humankind. Real pictures of modern landscape are like quiet sites of disaster. The relationship between humans and nature shall be reinterpreted.

Yunyi LIU
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Since her artist’s residency in Germany, Yunyi LIU has considered ruins vehicles bearing memories, historic memorials and an assemblage of past space and time. Through the process of image-making, meanings of faded spaces are elevated and their values transformed. Abandoned spaces, cities and history can thus re-enter possible dialogues; there is a quest for the rebirth of another level of meaning amidst

the decay and desolation. Due to its strategic location, Kinmen Island has been a site of military contestation. It was not ceded to Japan in 1895 following the First Sino-Japanese War, as Penghu and Taiwan were, but in 1937, it was occupied by Japanese army and after World War II returned to the Republic of China. Following Battle of Kinmen in 1949, the island was taken over by the army. In 1958, the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis took place. The island remained under martial law until 1992. During the civil war between Kuomintang and Communists in China, Kinmen was Taiwan’s line of defense. It underwent more than four decades of martial law and 36 years as an administrative experimentation of a battlefield. Particular military remnants and vistas are thus completely retained, attesting to the history of past warfare. On Kinmen, there are more than one hundred western-style buildings. Due to the hardship, the difficulty of making money, residents migrated by boat to South Pacific regions colonized by great powers. They became wealthy merchants and wired money to their country to construct western buildings they saw in the regions they migrated to, while integrating the Han culture and local specificities into the architecture. Yet along with the war, many western buildings were occupied by Japanese and KMT troops successively.

This publication includes a series of texts: an essay written by LU Peiyi, “The Power of Action: YAO Jui-chong and the Sample Survey of Idle Public Facilities in Taiwan”, an essay written by KUO Li-Hsin “Photographic Metaphors of a Contemporary ‘Renaissance Man’—Humanistic Concern in Shan-Shui by YANG Che-Yi”, and an essay written by Bo-Yi SHEN, “Call of the Ruins: The Photographic Collages”.

The Power of Action: YAO Jui-chong and the Sample Survey of Idle Public Facilities in Taiwan

Text by LU Peiyi

FOREWARD

When the new semester began in February 2010, YAO, presiding over the first classes of the fine arts departments at Taipei National University of the Arts and the National Taiwan Normal University, asked the students about their expectations for this class: did they wish to follow the normal class format, where the teacher would teach related knowledge, or would they like to use the class to do a “mosquito hall” investigation? The fifty-some students at the two universities decided to make a Taiwan-wide “mosquito hall” survey as the assignment for this semester. Through half a year of investigation across the island, the students identified one hundred and forty seven “mosquito hall” locations, compiling the 600 page book *Mirage—Sample Survey of Misused Public Facilities in Taiwan*, which outlines an absurd situation in Taiwanese society, embodying the fact that “misguided policy is worse than corruption.” Meanwhile, this artistic action took part in the 2010 Taipei Biennial Movement Project. It was widely reported in the media, and attracted a high level of attention from the government, even prompting a call from the Vice President and a visit from the Premier of the Executive Yuan, who advised all relevant departments to engage in an inspection of said facilities, ordering them to revive all mosquito halls within a year or consider demolishing them. Through six months of homework, the students’ art action was like a stone thrown into a pond, sending ripples outwards, shaking a presumably calm society and forcing them to face reality. Through interviews with YAO and participating students, this paper focuses on the following questions: What is the significance of this art project’s social participation? How does this project differ from a sociological survey or a special news report? Finally, it explores the power of participation. The author believes that the significance and value of this “participation” lie in the fact that it is both a collective action by YAOg and his students, and in that it used artistic methods to hold up a social issue to scrutiny and engage the awareness of the people in regards to that issue.

THE “MOSQUITO HALL” SURVEY

In the 1990s, with the rise of localism that followed the lifting of martial law and the push throughout society to create cultural policies, the construction of museums became a hot trend. Under the banner of promoting local uniqueness, various towns established regional museums as the embodiments of local uniqueness in practice. Meanwhile, following various master plans, government departments engaged in a building spree, as seen with the Transportation Ministry’s “one parking lot for every town,” the Environmental Protection Agency’s “one incinerator for every county,” and the countless scenic fish markets and agricultural product centers built by the Council of Agriculture. Not to be outdone, the Ministry of the Interior erected a series of buildings in the name of social welfare or social recreation. After massive amounts of public money were spent to construct these facilities, they were not put into operation according to plan. It is not that they were built but never put into use; when facing a lack of budgetary support, they were poorly managed and received few visitors, becoming rarely used public buildings. They became known as “deserted buildings” or “idle spaces,” or, colloquially, “mosquito halls”—these empty spaces were good only for raising mosquitos and served no other useful function whatever.

Though the public has been hearing about “mosquito halls” for a long time, they are not quite familiar with the substance of these “mosquito halls.” For instance, what is a mosquito hall? How many mosquito halls are there in Taiwan? How did mosquito halls come to be? What is the difference between a “mosquito hall” and an “idle facility”? Is each mosquito hall an isolated incident, or does it embody a structural issue in an industry? Is the mosquito hall a product of the collusion of the social system? Such questions became the root of awareness in this art project and its starting point.

YAO originally wanted to slowly figure out the story behind “mosquito halls” through his own inspection, but once he began, he realized that the more he looked, the more he found, the more pictures he took, the more houses there were. Also, the government was in the process of reviving some of the mosquito halls, and he hoped to document them before this revival. In this race against time, and in

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RUINS
PHOTOGRAPHY
PRESENT BODIES

consideration of the scale of the project, YAO shifted his project from a personal battle to a collective effort, breaking up the investigation among participants. A joint effort involving fifty students from the fine arts departments of Taipei National University of the Arts and the National Taiwan Normal University, the half year project known as the *Lost Society Document* was carried out from March to September 2010.

To begin, for the first six weeks of the semester, YAO taught the Normal University students the principles of photography and photography development techniques, while delivering six lectures on art and society at the Taipei National University of the Arts to enhance the students' social awareness. After these basic classes, students split up to collect materials and to take photographs in the towns as part of the survey. Upon returning to class, the students brought their materials together for classroom reports and discussions. Upon on-the-scenes inspections and record-checking of over two hundred thirty suspected cases, one hundred nineteen buildings were verified as being idle or underutilized public facilities while twenty eight had already been removed from the auspices of the Executive Yuan Council on Civil engineering, i.e. officially "revived" facilities. The result, in the form of on-the-scenes reports and photographs, were compiled into the 600 page illustrated book *Mirage—Sample Survey of Misused Public Facilities in Taiwan*.

The title *Mirage* clearly and incisively pointed out that the mosquito halls were merely exterior shells with no internal substance while implying that the government was misusing taxpayer money to construct these mirages which have no basis in reality. The subtitle, "Sample Survey of Misused Public Facilities in Taiwan," explains the target and methods of this art project. The "Misused Public Facilities of Taiwan" are the target, while the word "Sample" states that the collected cases are merely the tip of the iceberg, and "Survey" explains the methodology: a kind of bodily experience gained from engaging in observation while present at the scene, using "the presence of the body as a viewpoint" to really and truly reveal these social realities that are all around us but often ignored.

Through a close reading of *Mirage—Sample Survey of Misused Public Facilities in Taiwan*, one discovers the creative elements that mark all of YAO's art. First, the "active declaration of the body's presence" is a main thread that runs through the artist's oeuvre. Beginning with his early environmental measurements, he has used bodily presence, as well as the body's urination on the field (the *Territory Takeover* action), flight (the Recover Mainland China action, the World is for Allaction and the Liberating Taiwan action), or standing upside-down (*Chinatown—Dizzy*) to engage in measurement and to mark the body's occupation of the realm in question. Critic and curator Amy Cheng calls YAO a "creator of roads." YAO, who is always on the road, wants to do something that is "not merely satire, not merely witness; what he wants to say is not merely history or nihilism but to declare, under any and all circumstances, 'I'm here, I'm here, I'm here,'" presenting a sense of the real in the here and now.

YAO has been obsessed with the aesthetics of ruins since college. He says, "Sometimes in my wanderings, I often don't know where, perhaps on a small country road, I will see some ruins, and I will be drawn to them. It is a very serendipitous process; I never set out to choose anything in particular." These random wanderings in the ruins led him to use his camera to document those "manmade, untouched by man" places across the unknown corners of Taiwan, including abandoned residences, factories, warehouses, bunkers, amusement parks and holiday resorts, using black and white film to fix these scenes that have already been discarded by the times, these presences that have been forgotten by Taiwan's modernization, and using travelogue-type notes to describe "how a boring life can be summoned by the ruins."

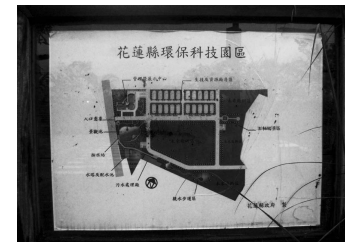
Roaming Among the Ruins of Taiwan, published in 2004, collects his black and white photography and writings beginning in 1988, presenting the dreamlike soliloquy of the man in the ruins. In the darkroom, the images that slowly coalesce in the developing solution are, for him, a quest to retrieve his own days of dejection and a way to say goodbye to his young days of wild wandering. Though this book is about his own feelings, the book's structure reveals his already-existent classifications of Taiwan's many ruins: Industrial Ruins and Environmental Pollution; Abandoned Residences, Destroyed Buildings and Official Manors; Abandoned Amusement Parks; Ruins of Idols and Gods; others include military ruins, transportation infrastructure ruins and abandoned islands. The book also includes his views on the ruins, which are more than just a romantic aesthetical perspective, but must also seek out the political economics that led to these ruins.

The Ruined Islands: Wandering the Ruins of Taiwan's Outlying Islands takes things a step further, using the lens to "see" the "products of a tragic age, those ruins that were intentionally forgotten." Unlike the random wanderings and photography of the previous phase, in this phase, he focused on the military ruins and prison ruins created by the changing political environment along the Taiwan Strait. These black and white photographs of the ruins both reveal a hidden reality and preserve a fast-disappearing now. Aside from serving as real evidence of "presence," they force the viewer to "see" not only the irreversible decline of these ruins, but also to make connections between these ruins and their surrounding sociopolitical circumstances, pushing the viewer to explore the wordless, helpless causes behind the creation of these ruins. Susan Sontag said that photography "inserts a person into a 'certain connection with society.'" Photography, especially documentary photography accompanied by reportage, is the front line of art's participation in society. When the power of the image is used to turn photography into a tool for participation in the changing of society, photography is no longer just a form of documentation; it becomes the photographer's criticism of the world.

Art critic Yu Wei believed that the 2006 solo exhibition *Everything will Fall into Ruin* and the 2007 book *The Ruined Islands* would be the true summation of Yao Jui-chongs Days Among the Ruins. Not only did YAO continue his wanderings among the ruins, but with the case study *Mirage—Sample Survey of Misused Public Facilities in Taiwan*, he led a group of students to wander the ruins with him. He went from a one-man struggle to collective action, from cool observation to real intervention into social operating mechanisms, shifting towards a more incisive focus, the "mosquito hall," a topic that directly touches on the current political-economic structure.

As a path towards positive engagement with the world, the "mosquito hall" represented a reversal of the artist's self-exile. We can get a sense of this in the opening remarks for the *Roaming at the End of the World* exhibition, which he held in 1997 with several other artists at an abandoned textile factory in Shanjihi: "If we say that resistance is a state of active engagement in the world, with hopes of changing something, then self-exile, or poetic wandering... points to a directionless direction, moving from below away from the grasp of the forces at the capitalist center, to be adrift in a mutual gaze with the enchanting images that roam through time and space."

The late 80s and early 90s were a period of great social change following the lifting of martial law. Though the artist's resistance was a state of positive engagement with the world, he often took on the massive system through individual effort alone, standing in opposition to the system, calling out and standing for the fall of the old system, holding out hope for change. The drifting, isolated, coolly observing state of self-exile is the other end of the spectrum, the desire to "use a mobile 'margin' to encircle an authoritative 'center.'" Following his growing maturity and the shift in mental state that is entailed by starting a family, Yao Jui-chong's artistic creation entered into a new phase. He says, "Having a child changed my entire life." When he thought about how his child would grow up in this society so full of problems, he began thinking about how he could promote change in this society. The "mosquito hall survey action" was his social practice in action, taking it further in a more strategic manner, using a massive survey to raise the issue to the fore, eliciting controversy and producing a real effect.



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The complicated part of the “mosquito hall survey action” is the collection and verification of cases. In an interview, the artist spoke of his methods of open and secret visits, and the interesting process. These methods were painstakingly documented in Huang Chien-Hung’s essay *Expensed Memories and the Scavenging of Memory*:

“The work engaged in by Yao Jui-chong and *Lost Society Documents* is not like the headline ‘exposés’ or ‘revelations’ engaged in by reporters or people’s representatives; it is more of an art of ‘scavenging,’ – an art of the perpetual recycling of ideas. What Yao Jui-chong unlike the public information read on the internet and the scattered exposés that appear in the media, Yao Jui-chong does not engage in an academic-style social survey or the use of fact-based methods to explore social relationships; instead he engages in Google searches, asks locals and passersby, inquires with local opposition parties, looks up media reports (the media viewpoint), redress papers from the Control Yuan (the internal government oversight viewpoint), and compiles the above materials, and through the teaching, learning and practice of these methods between the artist and his students, they take these memory fragments from the past decade or so around the cities and towns of Taiwan, and engage in the ‘gathering’ and ‘stitching’ of these ‘unsubsidized’ and ‘unfunded’ everyday folk methods.

The above description clearly delineates the differences between this artistic action and rigorous sociological investigations or special reports written from the media’s perspective. Sociological investigations emphasize the precise data, complete sampling methods and effective questionnaires of quantified research, or the rigorously defined focus groups, in-depth interviews, participatory observations and ethnographic field surveys of quantitative research, using scientific evidence to test a set hypothesis. News media reports mainly rely on interviews of involved parties or the explanations of related persons and tend to follow a thread of media exposure. The mosquito hall survey of Yao Jui-chong and his students, on the other hand, aside from the precision of basic data, places more emphasis on the experience of bodily presence, using the method of “presence as a viewpoint,” using the camera to “see” the true face of the ruins on behalf of the readers and using travelogue-style writings to lead the readers into the corners of these mosquito halls. As Yao Jui-chong said, the power of this artistic action lies in the good aesthetic training of the participants, their keen insights, soft souls and perceptive writing; this is precisely where the project differs from sociological research or news reportage. Overall, the “mosquito hall survey action” reveals social, political and economic issues with an aesthetic eye, and this is what makes artistic actions unique.

The “mosquito hall survey action” has two levels of critical significance: the first level is the criticism of the democratic system, and the second level is aimed at the ossification of the educational system. Yao Jui-chong believes that the mosquito halls are the product of the failings of democratic politics and economic transition. In the prologue he discusses the possible factors behind the production of “mosquito halls”:

“The ‘mosquito halls’ listed in this book are mainly public facilities constructed at great expense by government departments in the past twenty years. The reasons behind their formation are complex; some of the reasons include politicians writing campaign checks, the central and regional governments engaging in inappropriate and overly ambitious policy decisions, gunning for world records, overly optimistic utilization predictions, planning and design that is not in keeping with the needs of the people, facilities placed in inconvenient locations and insufficient funds for follow-through and maintenance, which leads to underutilization or utter idleness. Such ‘idle public facilities,’ built for political reasons, elections, the expansion of internal demand or attempts to bridge the urban-rural gap, are found across the country, and the problem has yet to subside.”

What Yao Jui-chong and his students set out to do was to establish a case file: to present these concealed or forgotten mosquito halls on the greatest scale possible over a short period of time, using the black and white output of mystical tension that is student photos from the scenes to present irrefutable evidence of government malfeasance. For instance, one passage discusses the construction of the Deep Sea Fishing Harbor in Jiading Township, Kaoshiung. The Hsing-ta Fishing Harbor was built in 1988 to alleviate the traffic overload of deep sea fishing vessels at Cianjhen. The new harbor occupied 380 hectares, and was lauded as the largest deep sea fishing wharf in Southeast Asia, but in recent years it has been hit by a contraction in the fishing industry, along with faulty government assessments of demand. Officials “declared” that a downturn in the fishing industry led to underutilization of the Hsing-ta Harbor and left it idle. It has recently shifted its direction towards short-range fishing vessels and tourism, with officials further investing for the “Kaoshiung Hsing-ta Harbor Recreation Beautification Project.” Their investigation of the resulting Lover’s Harbor, Seafood Market and Seaside Theatre concluded that the facilities were in neglect, visitors were few and the space was generally idle. Another example is the Hai’an Road Underground Market in Tainan, which was first conceived to alleviate a parking shortage in the commercial district and revitalize the area but now, twenty years later, has yet to be completed and put to use, becoming a blight on the city of Tainan. The case of Hai’an Road includes faulty assessments, bankrupt vendors and government corruption. Even after three short term art interventions to beautify the street, the underground market project remains indefinitely postponed. Many cases affirm the fact that “misguided policy is worse than corruption,” while reinvestments aimed at revitalization often fail, leaving many of these mosquito halls in a never-ending cycle of construction – idleness – revitalization – failure – re- revitalization – failure – idleness.



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The reason that the “mosquito hall survey action” was able to directly shake things up on the political level is that Yao Jui-chong, born of a politician family, possesses a degree of political sensitivity. Yao knew that he had to publish this book before an election to have a chance of eliciting a response from political figures, and he knew how to find the appropriate moment to place it at the steps of the halls of government. He understood the dimensions of that grey line, and he knew even more where the power of art lies: “Art provides the viewer with space to imagine, to interpret, to ponder; every individual has the potential to engage in a dialogue with society.” This is another reason behind the success of this action – “art” provided Yao Jui-chong with the identity of an artist, and this “anti-political” armor allowed him to intervene in this complex political issue from the perspective of the artist. Likewise, this project’s inclusion in the 2010 Taipei Biennial Movement Program provided the outside world with the visage of acceptance by the art world. Furthermore, Yao’s identity as a university professor and the collective artistic action of the students affirmed a sense of neutrality, which is one of the reasons that this survey action gained the trust of society. On the other hand, the “mosquito hall survey action” also challenged and attacked the educational system, including the conservatism of teaching, the separation of education from society and the university’s role to prepare students for society. Meanwhile, as a famous educational institution for producing educators, “Normal University” provided this artistic action with a stage from which Yao Jui-chong could walk the fine line of criticizing the system from within the system.

It cannot be denied that the students grew through this artistic action. In this survey comprising individual study, the students expanded the range of their studies, learning field photography, multidisciplinary perspectives, the collection of information, field surveys (overt surveys and covert visits), discovery and identification of problems, chatting up strangers (acting training), wall scaling (strength training), news chasing (the paparazzi spirit), topical planning, newswriting, editing, publishing, exhibition setup, meeting with political figures and giving interviews. Yao Jui-chong says:

“At first I was quite worried about whether or not these children of the so called ‘strawberry generation’ (children born in the 1980s) would be able to complete such a massive survey, but as the reports rolled in, I gradually gained a sense of the romantic sentiments buried in the hearts of these youths. The romanticism of which I speak is not in terms of romantic love but the desire for reform that is stirred by the social reality. It includes a kind of innocent sentiment that has yet to be wiped out by society, a sentiment that represents the possibility for tiny shrimp to band together and take on a giant whale.”

As these inexperienced students without a deep social awareness gradually gained a sense, through the process of the survey, of the absurdity and unfairness of their society, their perplexity gave rise to a new social awareness. For instance, Normal University student Wang Yueh-Hsin and Art University student Kuo Pin-Chun at first merely felt an aesthetic sentimentalism towards the ruins, but their participation in this project broadened their perspective on society. Aside from visiting the mosquito halls in person, this trip to the countryside was also an exploration of the self; Art University student Hu Ziqi feels that the process of returning home for the survey struck his understanding of himself and his hometown. The ethnic Bunun student came to feel that “Aboriginal culture cannot be represented by artifacts on display. Those soulless objects are absolutely incapable of expressing the spirit of the aboriginal peoples and their gracious, joyful hearts.”

Moreover, the students who travelled the ruins gained different experiences. In the documentary, Art University student Ke Junyao says that “interacting with the ruins is like a kind of therapy,” and that

“in making art you must excavate yourself... in a state of solitude you can say much to yourself.” Or perhaps you will come to feel that you are an intruder, and ask yourself, “In what kind of mental state should I approach these halted ruins?” The ruins also provided the students with artistic inspiration. Upon entering the abandoned Kinmen Culture Park, Art University student Wu Ping-Sheng unexpectedly stumbled across the “sounds” of the ruins: “the sounds of bird calls within the empty buildings.” He said, “I felt that there was a massive, empty space within the building, as if I were in a massive birdcage.” He recorded the “sounds” of the ruins and added a random noise as a response, creating an artwork.

Though the student voices in *Mirage-Sample Survey of Misused Public Facilities in Taiwan* appear young and naive, and this art project was focused on a survey of the mosquito halls across Taiwan, using photography and writing to reveal reality and criticize government actions, the shared participation and experience of the students is another point of value in this artistic action. In interviews, Yao Jui-chong says that the possible results of this action would be changes to the self, adjustment of aesthetic views, improvement of interpersonal relations, the production of value and the promotion of change in the social situation. Looking at the “mosquito hall survey action,” we can already see all of these effects presenting themselves. Through the students’ participation in this artistic activity (individual participation) and the shifts in their concepts and fields of vision, their relationship with society shifts closer to reality (participation in society). This artistic action can use artistic methods to raise real social issues, raising people’s consciousness for discussion (the citizen’s participation in society).

As of the writing of this article, the *Mirage “mosquito hall survey action” Part II* has already begun, with plans to publish another case survey. It will once again use the power of art to lift up an aspect of society to scrutiny.

LU Peiyi, National Culture and Arts Foundation –
A Case Study from the Social Participation of the Arts Project



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Photographic Metaphors of a Contemporary “Renaissance Man” – Humanistic Concern in *Shan-Shui* by YANG Che-Yi

By KUO Li-Hsi
Translated by Sylvie LIN

YANG is an unusual artist whose practice surpasses the mere definition of photographer. The appellation “visual artist” would not adequately describe his role or qualities. I would like to call him a contemporary “Renaissance Man.”

YANG’s academic background pertains to natural science and covers several engineering fields, including civil engineering, resources engineering and bioenvironmental engineering. With a master’s degree, he worked as assistant researcher in the Institute of Earth Sciences and Research Center for Environmental Changes of Academia Sinica, and he used to be an engineer in mining and geology. However, instead of further developing his career in the professional engineering field, he opted for devoting to artmaking based on images. With photography as his main artistic medium, he is active in Taiwan, China and the international art scenes. In addition to his efforts in artmaking, YANG invested much time and endeavor to promote culture and education of photography. He founded venues for photography shows, studios of photography art, the Children Photographic Society of Taiwan, among others. Moreover, he is keen on environment issues, artistic creation and children education, and is himself a national champion and coach in badminton.

Shan-Shui is a subject on which considerable and complete artistic concepts and aesthetic representations have been developed. Nevertheless, in reading *Shan-Shui*, a photography series by the artist with all-encompassing talent and abundant energy, it remains difficult to fully understand, solely through this series, the system of values and humanistic vocation that YANG attempts to incarnate through artmaking. A more complete understanding probably requires a closer look on more of his previous photographic works and other kinds of artistic practice and actions. Beyond photography, YANG’s artistic practice includes video art, reworking of a documentary of a construction (Taipei Dome), collective artmaking and curating of different art forms, curating children photography and poetry/documentary shows, among others. Despite the diversity of YANG’s approaches, the conditions of reality and of human examined in his art, as well as his images stating views or metaphors on how men treat Nature have remained the same.

YANG is interested in the relationship between man and land. In the series titled *Lanyang River* (2014), YANG’s distanced vision and emotionally detached photography record severe landscape and ecology alterations of the riverbed and soil of Lanyang River (an important part of his childhood memory) caused by growers of watermelon and other crops who turn the soil, leading to the lethal crisis of the beautiful river. Dried riverbed, ditches, watermelon farm devoid of man as well as faraway green mountains in his photographs compose strange vistas, juxtaposing the dry and dead river, the land with the evergreen distant verdant mountains within the same environment and space-time. Such juxtaposition echoes with his *Shan-Shui* series.

In his work titled *Boundary* (2010) about the Eight-Eight Flood and hurricane, YANG captures how the flood submerged the “line between heaven and earth” of Namasia Township, i.e. the height of accumulated mud and sand in each room at the moment of mudflow inundation. In the set of images, some look like abstract paintings while others obviously represent ruin-like scenes after the catastrophe. The houses that used to contain human activities and the content of their lives are now emptied of man and things; only traces of life swallowed by disaster remain. Just like *Lanyang River* or all of YANG’s works based on images, the style of *Boundary* is tranquil, detached and sober; it coldly represents the inevitable, sever price–Nature’s revenge—following our ignorant and greedy treatment toward the natural environment.

In confronting the land where he was born and nourished, YANG does not depict with images in overtly or excessively sentimental ways. On the contrary, he usually soberly contemplates disasters to the land caused by human actions. Such narrative aesthetics and style run through his entire photographic oeuvre. I always hold that a brilliant artist who deeply cares for land or people and holds profound comprehension of the environment or society would not make image art which is expressly emotional, full of cries and scream. Rather, he/she often coldly contemplates, witnesses and questions, since they know emotion and sentimentalism are not solutions but would even be misleading, covering due cognitive vision and problematics.

In other series by YANG Che-Yi which can be termed “contemporary ruins,” such sober documentary photographic style similarly possesses clear and strong visual metaphors and tension. In *Original* (2015) showing an array of old low apartments which underwent strong earthquake and conflagration after the gas explosion accident in Kaohsiung, YANG’s approach is similar to Walker Evans’ forthright approach in photographing housing architecture in the U.S. of the 1930s. Some of the apartments have become emptied after the disaster. Broken and shabby, they mark a stark contrast, visually and in terms of connotation, to Evans’ residences with radiance and clear lines or townhouses by the streets. *Dream House* (2016) is a collection of many “rough-in” houses standing in the middle of farms in Yilan, turning the excessively created, empty-shelled monsters of “agricultural recreation” into incongruous and extremely awkward contemporary visual landmarks and nightmares on Lanyang plain.

The groups of “unfinished buildings” in Ordos in Inner Mongolia the object of contemplation in YANG’s *Empty City Strategy* (2016) appear even more breathtaking. The scene has also been depicted in *Behemoth* by Chinese independent documentarist Zhao Liang. An array of uninhabited or unfinished concrete buildings towering by Loess Plateau in the form of very surreal concrete jungles silently relate the reality after maniac economic development in China, amounting to a “contemporary apocalypse” about the country of rushing economy. Meanwhile, YANG spent many years to continuously record the construction process and its current abandoned state of Taipei “Dome” construction; the gigantic steel structure, impossible to finish, standing by roads in the crowded Eastern District of Taipei appears like a super-ghost or alien, such a symptom of our strange desire and passion for constructing contemporary ruins.

YANG’s most impressive project based on images is his works on the theme of landscape; it is also the project for which the artist spent the longest period to make. His works around the subject include the black and white photography of *Shan-Shui* shown in 2006, *Orogenic* (3-channel video installation) shown in 2015 and *Shan-Shui* photography series made in Vietnam in 2018. Besides, *Cement Plant* (2009) can be considered an extension based on images under such theme. *Shan-Shui* series is a documentation of images about limestone pits in China invested by concrete corporations from Taiwan. In order to win trust from enterprise owners and their permission of shooting, YANG first worked in the excavation factory to build relations; he managed to shoot precious images of mines and explosions thanks to his professional knowledge in geological construction.

Regarding the series, its video representation is eye-opening with shocking visual effects while its photography representation rather intriguing and worthy of examination and deep reflection. In his composition of the mine’s shapes,

YANG appropriates the classic aesthetic form of landscape painting of Song Dynasty, representing contemporary landscape photography with intricate semiotics. The works involve visual semantic meanings that are highly dialectic, contradictory but also harmonious. In the first place, such dialectic meanings are represented through the visual structuring. We see “natural” hills faraway in the image while the foreground shows “artificial” or artificialized mines; the former are composed of organic lines and shapes whereas the latter become more geometric due to its “cut-off tops.” Images of Landscape are practically devoid of man. Yet the artificial and manmade mountains surely come from actions of humankind.

The meanings of signs in images of *Shan-Shui* also carry dialectic sophistication. While vistas of “natural” mountains belong to primitive ecology and appreciated by men or praised and depicted by humanistic artists, “artificial” mines become practical and valued materials being excavated for building houses. The former relates to a symbiosis of man and mountain whereas the latter is about man’s plundering, appropriating and eroding the mountains. With incessant growth of human intelligence and technology, the ever-increasing population and need for housing, as well as the intention of development and consumerism sought by capitalism, is it possible for man to forever avoid pillaging landscape? If not, then how shall man make use of nature? Eventually, YANG’s *Shan-Shui* represents thoughts and dialectics at the intersection of humanism, philosophy and science, engineering.

The dialectic questioning involved in YANG’s artmaking seems to retain a neutral position; what is represented is limited to scenes and phenomena. However, in my view, his ultimate concern in terms of humanism and philosophy remains clear. YANG values beautiful memories in the childhood process of growing up, cares about children education in Yilan, as well as land, culture and people. Sandstones excavated from natural landscape recorded in his *Shan-Shui* series are used for building the excessive tall buildings and houses which are unnecessary, mostly for profiting or showing one’s wealth, as being witnessed in *Dream House* or *Empty City Strategy*. One after another, the concrete jungles and “contemporary ruins” come to form contemporary “new landscape.” The photographic metaphors and humanistic spirit in YANG’s *Shan-Shui* are rich, lucid, coherent and rather admirable.

[1]
[m]





[n]

Call of the Ruins: The Photographic Collages of Yunyi LIU

By Bo-Yi SHEN

Translated by Jonathan Barnard

In modern life, how do we reexamine the abandoned, the overlooked, the dilapidated? While studying in Germany, the artist Yunyi LIU would occasionally stumble upon derelict buildings from the old East Germany. Full of alluring historical traces, they provided something of a surreal experience by connecting to dreamlike, subconscious states. Consequently, LIU began photographing these architectural ruins in a project that she named “The Vanishing Portraits.”

For Yunyi LIU, ruins convey the passage of time, traces of history, and a certain melancholy. They resemble the collective unconscious, concealing and suggesting more than straightforwardly revealing. Ruined buildings are like invisible places buried within our daily lives. Although they may not garner the spotlight, their existence bears witness to the rise and fall of eras and of the physical objects associated with them.

THE CALL
OF HISTORY

From her project of photographing European ruins, LIU next turned to capturing photographs on Kinmen for her “Oblivion Island” exhibition. Upon returning to Taiwan, she was attracted to the ruins of Western-style buildings here left from earlier historical eras. Their outer appearances intrigued her. Although the structures have undoubtedly witnessed much history, she hasn’t chosen to highlight their historical significance. Instead, her images of them aim to open all manner of possible interpretations.

Nevertheless, in this series of photographs on Kinmen, we can detect some strong political symbols that are intimately connected to our identities, memories and histories. Hearing these historical calls, we are once again forced to confront a history that has been all too easily forgotten in this age of consumerism.

It’s worth noting that these ruins are in fact products of modernization that bear witness to how the things that are rejected by the rapid advance of modern society are promptly cast off behind us. LIU picks up these shattered discards of history sliver by sliver. From what she’s gathered, we gain a sense of the former glory of these works of architecture—how they too were once “modern” for their eras. And we come to realize that the modern cities of the current day will inevitably turn into relics of a bygone age themselves.

CREATING IMAGES,
NOT TAKING PHOTOS

LIU revisits the “exterior surfaces” of relics, capturing photographs of their outer appearances. Furthermore,

she doctors the images of these buildings digitally to “restore” them. LIU thus transcends the mere “indexicality” endemic to photography to acquire some of the “fictitiousness” of painting. Thanks to digital manipulation, these works have become a form of “digital painting.” By eliminating certain modern elements (such as motor vehicles), she returns these ruins to what, in her mind, are their true selves. In other words, she is not merely taking photographs: Rather, she is spending energy creating images that restore purity to her perceptions.

This “image construction,” as well as the exhibitivite method of blowing up photographs’ details clearly, causes our perspectives to constantly shift around the works. It becomes very difficult to grasp them in their entirety from a single perspective (as opposed to smaller photographic works). And this shifting of perspectives makes one conscious of the flow of time. What’s more, the “digital collage” method that she has employed to reconstruct these works of architecture gives the viewer a strong sense of temporal breaks and overlaps.

This method also brings details of the architecture into sharp focus and provides “visual angles that would be impossible in reality.” (Since the perspective of our flesh-and-blood eyes is constantly changing, it is only through the deliberate operation of photography that it is possible to reveal these kinds of mechanical perspectives.) Consequently, these photographic collages engender in viewers a sense that the works are “more real than real life,” and they provide suggestions of a ghostlike spirit that takes hold in the realm between what exists (the ruin that can be found out in the real world) and what doesn’t (the ruin we see as constructed by LIU, offering perspectives that we would not have in real life).

More than merely shooting surface images of derelict buildings, LIU is reconstructing an invisible awareness that humanity has hidden in the realm of dreams. These seemingly materialistic ruins are in fact pointing to deep layers within our interior mental structures. Meanwhile, her creativity spurs us to consider our own memory, imagination and identity.



[o]



[P]

YAO Jui-Chun
[a]–[h]

[a] Courtyard of First Public Retail Market, Beigang Township, Yunlin County



[b] Exterior of Northern Exhibition Hall, Dayuan Dist., Taoyuan City



[c] Mazu Culture City, Dacang Yu., Penghu Islands



[d] Environmental Science and Technology Park, Hualien County



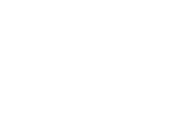
[e] Waipu Fishing Port Recreational Fishery Center, Houlong Township, Miaoli County



[f] Xingda Offshore Fishing Harbor, Oiding Dist., Kaohsiung City



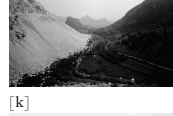
[g] Exterior of Northern Exhibition Hall, Dayuan Dist., Taoyuan City



[h] Waste Composting Demonstration Factory, Waipu Dist., Taichung City



YANG Che-Yi
[i]–[m] Shan-Shui



Yunyi LIU
[n]–[p]

[n] The vanishing Portraits, Fang-Chien Hsueh Western-style Building, Kinmen



[o] The vanishing Portraits, Jin-Cheng Wang Western-style Building, Kinmen



[p] The Vanishing Portraits, Huei-Huang Huang Western-style Building, Kinmen



CURATOR

Chun-Chi WANG is a Berlin-based curator engaged in collaborative art production and research. She is trained as artist at New York University Tisch School of the Arts. In 2012, she was Assistant Curator for Taipei Biennial, Modern Monsters / Death and Life of Fiction. Her projects was presented in Berlin, Paris, New York, Taipei, Seoul and South America in various collaborations from 2010 to 2018. A collective and intergenerational investigation of feminism in the context of contemporary art practice that included a symposium, exhibition; and lecture. She is the founder of IDOLONSTUDIO (Union of European Asian Artists), is a non-profit, interdisciplinary organization that provides innovative artists working in the media, literary, and performing arts with exhibition and performance opportunities to create and present new work. (www.synapse.info/profiles/wchunchi/)

ARTISTS

YAO Jui-Chung (b.1969) is a leading contemporary artist who has also worked as a curator, critic, activist, and academic in Taiwan. The themes of his works are varied, but most importantly they examine the absurdity of the human condition. In recent years, he has created photo installations, one of his ongoing projects is Mirage: Disused Public Property in Taiwan, in which he has assembled photos of ruins and failed public construction projects to reveal the political and economic situation in Taiwan hidden behind the trends of globalization. Yao has represented Taiwan at the Venice Biennale and has also participated in the International Triennial of Contemporary Art Yokohama, APT6, Taipei Biennial, Shanghai Biennial. (www.yaojuichung.com)

YANG Che-Yi (b.1981), Contemporary photographic artist, now dwells in Yi Lan, has been a badminton player since childhood. He was studying in environmental science after he grown up. In 2006, he withdrew his study because of a serious illness after his trip back from India. He begins to reconsider the meaning of life, then turn to the decision of creating photographic art, writing life in the image with his ideas and inspiration. This work has been selected into the permanent collection of the Japanese Kiyosato Museum of Art. In 2009, he was awarded in the Cloud Gate Dance Theatre Rangers Program, alone to carry out a trip to China for another self wandering journey. He is the most creative and inspire artist among young photographic artists.

Yunyi LIU (b.1981), As in her earlier work, recently Yunyi LIU has continued to examine the border areas and overlappings of space and time, memory and history. LIU's latest project Landscaping from History comprises a photo series of the same title as well as the sketch project A Catalogue of a Border Island's Defensives, both produced during several excursions by the artist to the Taiwanese Kinmen Islands. Located directly on the border to today's mainland China, due to its strategic significance this small archipelago was repeatedly coveted by the military over the course of history and so became a setting of frequent violent conflicts. (www.liuyunyi.de)

AUTHORS

LU Pei-Yi is a curator, researcher and art critic, based in Taipei. She awarded PhD in humanity and Cultural Studies (London Consortium) from University of London in 2010. Her research interests are off-site art, museum studies and curating in theory and practice. Now, as an assistant professor of Department of Cultural Creative Industry and Program Leader of MA International Program, Critical and Curatorial Studies of Contemporary Art, National Taipei University of Education. Also, teach in the Fine Art Department at Taipei National University of the Arts.

Li-Hsin KUO is a art critic and professor of the Department of Radio and Television National at Chengchi University in Taipei. He recently wrote a book Manufacturing Meaning: Discourse, Power and Cultural Politics in Realist Photography to argue the role which realist photography has been playing in the politics and the cultural history in both Taiwan and other parts of the world.

Bo-Yi SHEN is a art critic and image researcher, he is mainly focused on Taiwan's contemporary art and photography culture in an attempt to explore the relationship of tension between contemporary art and photography. He is responsible for the documentation and review of various photography lectures at Lightbox, and has been a regular columnist in ArtCo magazine since February 2017. His critical essays have been published in Artist magazine, and in the internet media The Reporter. He also maintains a personal opinion blog entitled Implication.

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