

**GHOSTS
AMONG
THE RUINS:
URBAN
TRANSFORMATION
IN CONTEMPORARY
CHINESE ART**

DAVID SPALDING

The stream swirls. The wind moans in
The pines. Grey rats scurry over
Broken tiles. What prince, long ago,
Built this palace, standing in
Ruins beside the cliffs? There are
Green ghost fires in the black rooms.
Tu Fu, *Jade Flower Palace* (712–70)

Exorcise not in order to chase away the ghosts, but this time to grant them
the right ... to a hospitable memory ... out of a concern for justice.
Jacques Derrida, *The Specters of Marx*

I N TRODUCTION/INCANTATION

To believe in ghosts is to admit that we cannot escape the past. When bygone events are willfully ignored, voided, or otherwise rendered imperceptible, they give rise to ghosts—spectral figures that attempt to reveal what has been excised from collective memory. Ghosts are not simply human spirits who continue to roam the earth after their bodies have decayed. Rather, they are forces whose presence disturbs our temporal and empirical expectations in order to remind us of earlier disasters and injustices that live beneath the thin skin of the present.

Yet a ghost's enchanted history lessons are never straightforward. Instead, they flicker in the dark corners of our minds, operating outside the laws of logic, often broadcasting scrambled transmissions. Though they can be comforting, affirming what we've suspected all along, ghosts seldom bring good news: One is never *haunted* by pleasant events, unless they dissemble an unknown undertow fraught with terror. Still, without these haunting confrontations, the wounds of the past can never be redressed.

The term *haunting* best names the ways that certain historical moments—and the forgotten faces and demolished places that comprise them—return to puncture the present. Understanding haunting in this way helps us to detach the figure of the ghost from visions of a ravaged, reanimated corpse, wreaking vengeance and havoc. Instead, haunting points to visitations from something more mysterious and, sometimes, more frightening. As sociologist Avery Gordon has written:

If haunting describes how that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence, acting on and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities, the ghost is just the sign, or the empirical evidence if you like, that tells you a haunting is going on ... The ghost or the apparition is one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eye, makes itself known or apparent to us, in its own way, of course.¹

The pieces of the past that return to haunt us are precisely those which have been pushed off the margins and over memory's edge. The time lines, neat narratives, and illustrations that comprise our accounts of the past can only tell us part of the story. In fact, historical records—in both our psychological and institutional archives—often operate under the logic of exclusion, which tries to discard whatever cannot be easily assimilated. What remains are history's remains, its forgotten subjects still stirring in the shadows, whispering incessantly and eager to take possession of the present. Though missing from our textbooks and collective memories, these ghosts will not be ignored. They will not be laid to rest anytime soon because they still have something they need to communicate, and we need to pay attention. Perhaps they've been exiled from their homes, murdered, or enslaved. "All the departed may return," writes Nicolas Abraham, "but some are predestined to haunt: the dead who have been shamed during their lifetimes or those who took unspeakable secrets to their grave."²

Ghosts often come to us in the form of sightings, their shapes vaguely outlined in the shadowy half-light that lies between the visible and the invisible. Sometimes we need the aid of a seer to establish contact. Other times, they make their presence known through a striking absence, carving their outlines onto the present in a kind of intaglio that urgently tells us that *something is missing*. "Visibility," writes Laura Kipnis, "is a complex system of permission and prohibition, of presence and absence, punctuated by apparitions and hysterical blindness."³ In fact, haunting is inextricably linked to seeing, to the revelations of our phantasmatic visions and to the blind spots that sometimes shroud the past in dark obscurity. Accordingly, visual artists are in a unique position to give form to the specters of the past that still shape our present. Such hauntings, whether staged or sighted by visual artists, channeled through the myriad media of contemporary art, have become my preoccupation.

The essay that follows is part of a larger project entitled *Haunted Histories: Spectral Vision in Contemporary Art*, a collection of related texts examining recent artworks that conjure the ghosts of the past in order to satisfy a haunting imperative for justice. Fundamental to these artworks is the assertion that by reclaiming lost histories and understanding the ways they haunt the present, we may begin to heal. In addition to the artists named below, *Haunted Histories* also considers works by Dinh Q. Lê, Jorma Puranen, Carrie Mae Weems, and Kara Walker, among others.⁴ Staging historical re-visions, uncanny meetings between the present and the often traumatic past, the living and the dead, these artists continually remind us that the ghosts of the past

cannot—and should not—be laid to rest. Re-membering the figures dismembered by official histories, these artworks allow viewers sustained contact with phantoms of a forgotten past. Each artist invents new ways to challenge dominant visual histories, to envision and reintegrate excised social memory, and to encourage the healing of wounds that have gone ignored.

T H E GHOSTS OF CHINA'S URBAN RUINS

If *haunting* describes how pieces of the shattered, shunned past return to impact our consciousness, this process is concretized by the reconstruction of the cities of contemporary China. The breakneck demolition of China's urban centers has resulted in a man-made disaster, one whose hallmark is the violent erasure of the *hutongs*, narrow alleyways filled with courtyard housing that have changed little over the last two thousand years. Now, only piles of rubble remain where homes once stood—and even the debris quickly disappears. As bulldozers relentlessly push China's cities toward modernization, the past is being eviscerated with a rapidity that denies the cities' inhabitants a chance to mourn what they have lost. The speed and force with which city planners have razed historic residential areas in Beijing and Shanghai has torn sudden, gaping holes into the fabric of everyday life, leaving the landscape scarred with dusty, haunted ruins.

Walking through the smaller lanes of Beijing or Shanghai, one's senses are assaulted: The pounding of jackhammers and the fierce bite of bulldozers have become a perpetual death knell so constant that, after a while, you simply stop hearing it. Dust fills your lungs as the concrete crumbles beneath your feet. Looking up, you may be struck by the sci-fi architecture of the future, somehow grafted onto the present. In Shanghai, freeway overpasses glow an eerie, electric blue, while Pudong's Oriental Pearl Tower—the penultimate symbol of Chinese modernization—resembles a silver spacecraft resting on its launching pad. Yet on the ground, piles of broken bricks and debris mark the places where people recently lived. Men covered in pulverized mortar hurry past, pushing wheelbarrows that contain the only remaining traces of a neighborhood. Commenting on this temporal rupture and its emotional ramifications, the artist Zhan Wang has remarked:

As someone who has lived all his life in Beijing, I have seen this regime demolishing nonstop. They don't let you choose a place and make it special and meaningful; sooner or later, they will take it down. By trying to reach a level of Western-oriented modernization, we are destroying the continuity of our own tradition.⁵

The constant demolition and reconstruction of China's cities during the last decade may represent the most radical restructuring of urban space on earth. Traditional courtyard housing communities are being leveled to accommodate shopping centers and business plazas, while large-scale apartment complexes are being built to house those dislocated by the demolition. Critic and curator Wu Hung notes: "Old houses are coming down everyday to make room for new commercial buildings, often glittering high-rises in the so-called 'Chinese post-modern' style. Thousands of people have been relocated from the inner city to the outskirts by official decree."⁶

Since the mid-1990s, a number of experimental Chinese artists have created works in response to the urban demolition, giving form to the specters of the past that still shape their present. The photographs, site-specific projects, performances, and installations of Rong Rong, Song Dong, Sui Jianguo, Zhan Wang and Yin Xiuzhen link the destroyed neighborhoods and razed buildings to haunting memories and visions of what has been obliterated. Some of these works, such as Rong Rong's photographs of razed houses, transform demolition sites into memory palaces, conjuring what has been erased by the destruction. Other projects, such as the installations of Yin Xiuzhen, attempt to reassemble the broken pieces of the urban landscape, inviting the exiled past to overlap onto the present. These artistic interventions activate haunted zones amid the ruins and rebuilding. They evoke the ghostly presence that seethes behind the shimmering exteriors of the new buildings and lingers in what remains in the wreckage of the past, refusing to be forgotten.

DESTRUCTION/DEMOLITION: NOTES ON CHINA'S MODERN URBAN PLANNING

Until the late 1980s, much of China's residential urban planning had been guided by the existence of *hutongs*, narrow alleyways filled with *siheyuan*, single-story compounds originally designed to house three generations of a single family in living quarters that form a four-walled frame surrounding an open courtyard. No less important than the earthbound residents of a *siheyuan*, ancestor's tablets and family shrines played an integral role in the division of space: Traditionally, these living pieces of the past were carefully positioned to receive the first rays of morning light that pierce that *siheyuan's* southeast entrance.⁷ Today, *siheyuan* often house several smaller families whose members have been intertwined for generations. Largely unchanged since their development during the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.–A.D. 220), these *hutongs* and *siheyuan* have played a strong role in shaping the social fabric of urban China, creating communities that function as extended families.⁸

Explaining his emotional connection to the traditional housing of Beijing, artist Song Dong expresses the sense of loss that hangs over the city as these buildings are demolished:

I have always lived in a *hutong*, a traditional Beijing alley. The *hutong* represents a way of life and subsistence. Among people living in the same *hutong* there exists a very special degree of familiarity ... Practical issues are not everything; people also have spiritual needs ... The types of relationships that I used to entertain with other people living in the same *hutong*, which was probably very similar to that of other people living in other ones, is slowly disappearing.⁹

In the wake of reforms in China's political and economic policies initiated by Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s, the Chinese urban landscape underwent its most severe transition.¹⁰ The designation and development of Special Economic Zones such as Shanghai's Pudong area, combined with the commercialization of former residential areas, has made cities such as Beijing and Shanghai nearly unrecognizable.¹¹ As a result, *hutongs* and courtyard housing have been demolished as quickly as possible, leaving a landscape littered with ruins.

PICTURING RUINS: RONG RONG'S DOPPELGANGERS OF DECAY

"More than any other photographs on the subject," Wu Hung has written, "Rong Rong's images of demolished houses in Beijing capture the anxiety and silence adrift in these modern ruins."¹² The young Beijing-based artist's haunted, fractured landscapes focus on the images left behind by the buildings' former residents: pinups and personal photos that remain after the inhabitants have vanished. A variation on the *doppelganger*—those ghostly doubles of the living that often act as death omens—the figures in Rong Rong's pictures seem to stand in not for those missing persons whose homes have been destroyed, but for their discarded daydreams. Coolly detached, the decrepit images embedded within Rong's photographs stare out from fallen walls and rubble, unaware that their surroundings have collapsed. In this way, Rong's images simultaneously memorialize the past and point to the frailty of our present state.

In the first of three black and white photos that comprise Rong's untitled triptych (1996–97), debris blankets the entire landscape. All that remains are the ruins of a few dwellings, empty shells that have somehow escaped Beijing's bulldozers. A figure stands in the distance with his or her back turned toward the viewer, lending a sense of scale to the photograph. Completely surrounded by broken stones and upturned earth, the dwarfed figure seems paralyzed, a scarecrow standing sentry in a garden of disasters, the last soldier of a lost battle. In the fore, a large,



RONG RONG, *UNTITLED*, 1996–97



RONG RONG, *UNTITLED*, 1996–97

FROM A GROUP
OF THREE
BLACK AND
WHITE PHOTOS,
20" X 24"
(COURTESY
TOM VAN EYNDE)

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OF THREE
BLACK AND
WHITE PHOTOS,
20" X 24"
(COURTESY
TOM VAN EYNDE)

abandoned photo-image shows the face of a beautiful young woman. Her black hair remains carefully parted, her lips frozen in a knowing smile. The picture sits on its side, framed and protected by what remains of a wooden rectangular structure. Staring out at the viewer with a seductive gaze, she seems not to notice the chaos that surrounds her. Dirt and gravel have cracked through the photo's surface, underscoring the violence and decay that envelops the woman's smile. Evoking the devastated desires of the razed neighborhood's inhabitants, her face allows the day-dreams of the missing to mark the fractured landscape.

Another photograph from the triptych shows the walls of a ruined structure covered in fraying, peeling calendars. The ravaged calendars suggest that while decay is a natural process, the sudden erasure of whole neighborhoods has also laid waste to conventional modes of marking time's passage. In the zone of the haunted ruin, past and present blur as traces of what has been voided make their presence felt. The central figures in the photo appear in the large pictures above the calendars' dates: Torn images of European fashion models have become the ruin's wallpaper. Wearing elegant evening clothes, three women pose amid lavish interiors. Surrounded by candelabra, spotlight oil paintings, and a Roman bust, they stand at portals to a zone of decadent abundance, inviting viewers to enter a scene that stands in sharp contrast to the physical reality. In Rong's photos, these fantasies of luxury have given way to phantoms. Ironically, the spirit of wealth and ease that the fashion photos embody will be resurrected after the *hutong's* destruction, seen again in the store windows of the new shopping districts that are replacing neighborhoods of traditional housing.

Photographs of ruins often reveal an attempt to freeze the forces of decay, preserving the ruin's image in a state of suspended animation. This defiant mastery over the forces of nature—whose destructive power one confronts in the photo—can sometimes be as appealing to some as the ruins themselves. Michael Roth describes this fantasy of the immortal ruin:

By fixing ruins on photographic paper, we don't repair them, but we have the illusion of reclaiming them from the further effects of nature and of time—that is, from death. This illusion is based, in part, on our forgetting that the representations, whether on photographic paper or on canvas, will also age and become with time ruins of another sort.¹³

Yet there is no way to overcome the decay that Rong Rong's photos depict. The ripped, ruined pictures that appear *within* the artist's work are an ever-present reminder that everything will eventually fall into decline—even Rong's pictures themselves. The doppelgangers that lurk within the ruins are harbingers of a destruction from which there is no escape.

In many Chinese ghost stories, the dead do not know that they have passed away. Instead, they try to carry on with their everyday lives, disturbing the fabric of the present through their unwitting haunting. The ghostly figures that pose for us in Rong Rong's photos seem oblivious to the fact that their world has crumbled to dust. The people who once inhabited these demolished houses have marked the ruined architecture with the imprints of their imaginations. Now their dreams and desires rise from the rubble, transformed into their own doomed doubles. Standing in what has become an abandoned graveyard, covered in dirt and frayed at the edges, they try to appear seductive, unable to comprehend what they have become.

D E MOLITION AND DIFFERENCE: CHINESE AND WESTERN CONCEPTIONS OF THE RUIN

Whenever buildings are broken by the explosion of bombs or artillery shells, by fire or structural collapse, their form must be respected as an integrity, embodying a history that must not be denied.

Lebbeus Woods, *War and Architecture*

Western Europe's longstanding history of associating ruins with creativity and the melancholic imagination is well documented, from images of England's famously decrepit Tintern Abbey to the poetry of Wordsworth. The popularity of romantic, ravaged architecture reached its apogee in the artificial ruins that were erected in the gardens of French and English aristocrats from 1770 to 1790.¹⁴ But these ruins have little to do with the sudden, shocking demolition sites of urban China. As Michael Roth reports:

By the eighteenth century, the taste for decay had become a mark of aesthetic sensitivity for many aristocratic Europeans. But the kind of decay that was to please, the kind that was to call up the pleasurable melancholy that writers associated with the contemplation of ruins, was a slow process.¹⁵

Even in the West, images of slow decay were eventually overshadowed by another type: depictions of ruined buildings that toppled in blinding flashes, often due to civil unrest, war, or natural disaster. Images of vines creeping over cracking stone were replaced by photographs documenting piles of rubble and empty spaces where buildings once stood.¹⁶

China's relationship to the images of architectural decay runs along a different axis. As Wu Hung notes, "There was indeed a taboo in premodern China against preserving and portraying ruins: although abandoned cities or fallen palaces were lamented in words, their images, if painted,

would imply inauspiciousness and danger."¹⁷ While visual depictions of ruins may have been out of the question, they appeared in many poems and popular tales, often haunted by spirits of the past. During the Qing Dynasty, Pu Sung-Ling, perhaps China's most famous writer of supernatural tales, wrote of Keng Chu-Ping, a young man who dares to spend the night in the ghost-infested ruins of an abandoned family estate:

The Kengs of Taiyuan were at one time a noble family with a magnificent mansion. Later their fortunes declined so that half the mansion was left empty and in ruins. Thereupon weird happenings started. Doors would open and shut themselves, and members of the household were often frightened at night and raised the alarm. The master, greatly perturbed, moved his family elsewhere, leaving an old man there as gatekeeper. After that the place went even more to rack and ruin, and laughter, talk, singing, and music could often be heard there.¹⁸

Tampering with our experience of time's passage, ruins are haunted sites par excellence. Fractured pieces of the past that have fallen into decay, ruins like those described by Pu Sung-Ling refuse to go quietly to their graves. Instead, they gain new life as physical manifestations of temporality itself, capable of representing both the slow, sure agency of nature and the fierce, destructive force of humans.¹⁹

When ruins were finally introduced into China's visual culture during the nineteenth century, they served as warnings to the public about the possibility of foreign invasion. The ruins of Yuanming Yuan, the garden pavilions of the royal Manchu house, which were destroyed by joint forces of the British and French armies in 1860, are a prime example. For years, these ruins were only visible to the public as photographic propaganda, accompanied by texts that emphasized the demolished buildings as proof of foreign hostilities. "Ruin images were legitimated," Wu Hung notes, "but what made them 'modern' (i.e., what distinguished them from classical Chinese ruin poetry) was their emphasis on the present, their fascination with the violence and destruction, their embodiment of a critical gaze, and their mass circulation."²⁰ Wu Hung has termed these images "demolition ruins,"²¹ a turn of phrase that brilliantly captures the sensibility of those contemporary Chinese artists who address the destruction that surrounds them.

T H E FUTILE NECROMANCY OF ZHAN WANG

Necromancy is the dark art of conjuring the dead, usually by performing rites and oblations on the corpse of the deceased. More than other types of ghostly contact, necromancy evokes ghoulish

associations: rotting bodies that rise from desecrated graves to serve the necromancer. Yet necromancy can also be seen as an attempt to rescue and revivify what the forces of death and destruction have claimed. In the old neighborhoods of Beijing, half-demolished buildings are everywhere, standing on their last legs with the precariousness of the fatally wounded. In 1994, Zhan Wang created his *Ruin Cleaning Project*, a series of public performances that tried to breathe life back into the ruins by cosmetically treating their shattered facades. In his English-language summary of the project, Zhan writes:

The commercial area in Wangfujing Street is funded by businessmen from Hong Kong, where the old small and simple houses had undergone vicissitudes. Although they were beautiful buildings with Chinese and Western styles of architecture combined, they could not escape from the fate of being demolished. Because the capital needs modernization, needs a commercial district.

On Oct. 12, I had decorated the half torn-down debris for a whole day.

The objects and the ways I saved them:

What was left in the debris was only one red pillar with a joist. First, I brushed the pillar with a brush to make it clean, then I painted the joist with red paint.

Then I cleaned the half-leftover white door frame and painted it with white paint.

I cleaned the decorative ceramic tiles with a piece of cloth.

I decorated a wall with indoor coating materials. [...]

Results: Late afternoon that day, bulldozers began to tear down those houses, and a few days later, there appeared a devastated tract of land.²²

While unable to spare the buildings from their demise, Zhan's performance made explicit what many of Beijing's residents must have felt: the impossibility of raising the spirit of a dying way of life.

Recently recounting the project in a discussion with critic Francesca Del Lago, the artist explained that his feeling of futility fueled the work:

There is a terrible contradiction here. On the one hand, they [the agents of development] oppose tradition and destroy the old culture; on the other, they attempt to revive it in artificial ways. We cannot simply oppose this current modernization...Your oppositional voice has absolutely no chance to be heard. My *Ruins* [sic] *Cleaning Project* emerged from such a condition. I started cleaning and restoring a building during its demolition, when the bulldozers had stopped for a few days. This was not about nostalgia, but about my state of embarrassment and impotence, knowing that nothing I could do could change or stop this process.²³

The photographs that document the *Ruin Cleaning Project* invoke a narrative of haunted architecture, one that begins with Zhan's unsuccessful attempt to revive a decaying and demolished building and terminates in the shimmering high-rise that now stands in its place. Seen in this context, the modern building seems erected on the burial site of a disappearing way of life, as if underneath the smooth



ZHAN WANG, *RUIN CLEANING PROJECT*, 1994

ZHAN WANG, *RUIN CLEANING PROJECT*, 1994



BULLDOZER, WANGFUJING, BEIJING
(COURTESY THE ARTIST)

PERFORMANCE,
WANGFUJING,
BEIJING
(COURTESY
THE ARTIST)



ZHAN WANG, *CLASSROOM EXERCISE*, 1995

PART OF THE GROUP INSTALLATION
PROPERTY DEVELOPMENT BY
THE THREE MEN STUDIO
(COURTESY THE ARTIST)

glass facade of the new structure something darker lurks: the specter of its murdered predecessor. In the radical rebuilding of Beijing, few spaces are exempt from the bulldozer. In 1994, the government announced that Beijing's Central Academy of Fine Arts, which was located next to the Wangfujing commercial district, was slated for demolition. A real estate magnate from Hong Kong had incorporated the land into a multimillion-dollar redevelopment plan. Though artists and faculty at the Academy dissented, their protests were useless.

Two days after the building was cleared out, the Three Men Studio²⁴—an artists' group founded in August 1995 by Sui Jianguo, Yu Fan, and Zhan Wang, all young faculty members at the prestigious Central Academy—staged a site-specific installation called *Property Development*. For the show, each member of the group conceived of a project that utilized the campus's newly razed landscape to address the loss. In Zhan Wang's contribution, *Classroom Exercise*, 1995, the artist used the broken bricks and discarded wood of demolished buildings to sculpt a natural disaster, piling up the rubble so that it appeared to be pouring in through the window of a classroom in the Department of Sculpture. He then took students' studies—sculpted human forms, painted bright pink and often curled into fetal positions—and situated them within the debris. Evoking the school's displaced students, the figures appear to have been swept up in a tidal wave of decay; their bodies now litter the ruins.

While clearly representing his experience of the Central Academy's destruction, Zhan's ruinous tsunami echoes another moment in Chinese history when man-made disasters left the landscape littered with rubble and remains. During the late 1950s, particularly during Mao's Great Leap Forward (1958–61), a series of ill-conceived hydroelectric dams and irrigation projects decimated Chinese villages, causing massive flooding and relocations.²⁵ Coupled with flawed agriculture policies, these disasters led to an estimated twenty to thirty million deaths, mostly due to starvation. This mad push for progress and modernization led to monumental catastrophes, including the violent disruption of rural ancestral burial grounds, due to forced flooding. This, combined with the government-mandated leveling of Confucian temples in 1974, left the countryside filled with angry ghosts. While reflecting the present, *Classroom Exercise* conjures the spirits of China's dark past. Yet as with Zhan's *Ruin Cleaning Project*, these attempts at necromancy are futile: As history seems to echo itself, the bygone spirits of Mao's reign seethe within the corpse-like sculptures of Zhang's installation—repeating, rather than escaping, their fate.

SUI JIANGUO'S APPARITIONS OF ABSENCE

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Apparitions are those supernormal forces that evoke the presence of a dead or living person in ways that defy the human eye. As Rosemary Ellen Guiley notes, "Few apparitional experiences are visual. Most instead involve the sensing of a presence ..."²⁶ When pieces of the past are evacuated into the realm of invisibility, an apparition may emerge, haunting the space once occupied by the living. In Sui Jianguo's contribution to the Three Men Studio's *Property Development* installation, *Ruins*, 1995, a haunted island emerges amid the chaos of the demolished school. After clearing and repaving a small area of the campus, the artist set up an orderly outdoor classroom: Carefully arranged rows of chairs face an abandoned teacher's desk, while cabinets at the room's perimeter reinforce its invisible boundaries. Even in photos of the installation, the empty chairs create a haunted space that is charged with the force of an unseen presence.

Sui continued to court the apparitions of Chinese history in his more recent *Legacy Mantle* series, 1999, comprising large-scale bronze sculptures of the once ubiquitous Mao jacket. Inverting the tale of the emperor with no clothes, these are clothes without an emperor, standing upright as if filled by an invisible specter. As critic Chang Tsong-Zung has written:

Sui Jianguo created his Mao Jacket Series, with the ambition of identifying the most significant China cultural icon of his time. This is a series of sculptures in the image of the "revolutionary" uniform made famous by Mao, and they are stiff shells of the jacket without the person inside. Sui saw in the jacket the representation of a *new faceless* power that broke free from China's traditional dynastic order.²⁷

This faceless power that Chang describes and Sui depicts is China's haunted past, returning as an apparition to haunt the present. In this play between presence and absence, the visible and the invisible, the forces conjured by Sui Jianguo refuse to go unnoticed, returning instead to stake their claims.

S
O
NG DONG AND YIN XIUZHEN:
PRESERVING REMAINS

In Beijing, all houses are branded with government-issue address plates, metal squares painted bright red and bearing the building's address in a uniform white font. In 1997, the artists Song Dong and Yin Xiuzhen (a married couple) began to detach address plates from houses in Beijing that were slated for demolition. Remarking on the significance of the address plates, Song observes that "as the only surviving sign of what used to be a house, a traditional Chinese compound, a street, the plate number is like an epitaph on a tombstone. It represents a way of life that has been erased."²⁸

After collecting the enameled plates over a two-year period, Song created *Door Plates*, 1997–99, an installation in which the artist embedded one hundred plates into the gallery floor, arranged in a highly regular grid. For those who are intimate with the city, the amassed address plates tell a story of nostalgia and destruction, individual plates evoking images of places that no longer exist.

While suggesting the ordered urban planning that has overtaken Beijing's twisting alleyways, the installation also resembles a graveyard. Viewers tiptoe across the floor, stepping onto displaced pieces of the past that have been preserved by the artist's efforts. Discussing how the demolition and rebuilding has transformed the social fabric of Beijing, Song has said:

Now everybody lives in three-dimensional compounds, in high-rise buildings. The relationships between family and family, between who is living here and who is living there, have changed. So have the relationships among individuals within the same family. Nothing is so multifaceted anymore; everything is much narrower and more clearly spelled out. Perhaps I am infatuated with a slowly vanishing type of relationship between people.²⁹

Song's *Door Plates* project conjures the ghosts of Beijing's missing communities, creating a zone haunted by memories, a space where the faces and spaces of the vanquished past are allowed to rise again.

Retrocognition is the term used by parapsychologists to describe a haunting temporal rift experienced when one finds that ghostly pieces of the past have encroached onto the present. While Song's installation creates a commemorative space inside the gallery, Yin Xiuzhen's *Transformation*, 1997, a public art project that takes place directly on the city's streets, permits what has been erased from the urban landscape to poetically reappear. *Transformation* revivifies traces of the old houses that were destroyed to make room for Beijing's Grand Avenue of Peace



SUI JIANGUO *RUINS*, 1995

PART OF THE GROUP
INSTALLATION
PROPERTY DEVELOPMENT BY
THE THREE MEN STUDIO
(COURTESY THE ARTIST)

SONG DONG

DETACHING A DOOR PLATE FROM A BUILDING
IN BEIJING (COURTESY THE ARTIST)



YIN XIUZHEN *TRANSFORMATION, 1997*

INSTALLATION OF TIME AND
PHOTOGRAPHS, BEIJING
(PHOTO BY SONG DONG, COURTESY THE ARTIST)



and Well Being. Describing the demolition that occurred to accommodate the new road, Wu Hung writes:

Envisioned as the second widest east-west road across central Beijing, the avenue will cover a broad strip of land ... in the most populated section of an overcrowded city. The "relocation" phase of the project was swiftly completed, and within several months in 1997–98, the site was emptied and the old houses destroyed ... They seem to have just suddenly disappeared; their streets and lanes simply vanished from the city's map.³⁰

To create *Transformation*, Yin took black and white photos of a block of houses slated for razing. Then, as the houses came down, she collected roof tiles from each demolition site. In the final stage of the project, she affixed the photos to the roof tiles, then positioned the tiles in a grid pattern on the ground where the houses once stood. Pedestrians passing through the busy new shopping district were confronted by an ominous reminder. Giving physical form to a ruined past, Yin superimposes it onto the present, creating a tangible metaphor for the ways our histories are haunted.

B I OGRAPHIES OF THE ARTISTS³¹

Rong Rong

Born in 1968 as Lu Zhirong in Zhangzhou, China, Rong Rong changed his name shortly after settling into Beijing's East Village, a thriving artistic community once located on the outskirts of the city. Rong's documentary photographs of the artistic activity there led to his *Artists in Exile* series, which was shown in his first photography exhibition, *The Witness of Contemporary Art in China*, at the Tokyo Gallery, Japan, in 1995. Since then, Rong's subsequent photographic series, such as the (untitled) *Ruins* series, have been featured in numerous group shows, including *China Avantgarde*, Gallery Q, Tokyo, 1996; *Contemporary Chinese Photography*, Berlin New Art Association, 1997; and *Transience: Experimental Chinese Art at the End of the Century*, the David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, Chicago, 1999. His work has also been the subject of several solo exhibitions, most recently *Rong Rong: Contemporary Chinese Photography*, Chambers Fine Art, New York, 2001. Rong Rong currently lives and works in Beijing.

Song Dong

Born in Beijing in 1966, Song Dong graduated with a degree in oil painting from the Capital Normal University, Beijing, in 1989. Song's solo projects have included the performance-based installation *One More Lesson: Do You Want to Play with Me?*, 1994, at Beijing's Central Academy of Fine Arts Gallery; *Breathing*, 1996, a public performance that took place in Tiananmen Square and Hou Hai, Beijing; and *Temporary Office Construction*, 1998, a site-specific installation and performance at Galerie-Tao, Sino-Japanese Youth Exchange Center, Beijing. His work has also been included in many group shows, such as *Home: Chinese Contemporary Art Show*, 2000, Shanghai; *Cities on the Move 7*, 1999, Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki; and *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Asia Society Galleries, New York, 1998–99. Working in myriad media, including public performance, video, photography, and installation, Song Dong lives in Beijing, and is married to the artist Yin Xiuzhen.

Sui Jianguo

Born in Qingdao, China, in 1956, Sui Jianguo graduated from the Shandong Institute of Fine Arts in 1984, continuing his studies at Beijing's Central Academy of Fine Arts, where he earned his MFA in sculpture in 1989. After graduation, he was awarded a post on the sculpture faculty at the Central Academy. The following year, Sui began work on his *Structure Series*, 1990–94, a series of experimental sculptures that stage surprising interventions into natural materials, such as river rocks. In 1995, Sui received a United Nations Artistic Fellowship to study in India for three months. The same year, he collaborated with artists Yu Fan and Zhan Wang to establish the

Three Men Studio, a group of artists dedicated to developing new visual languages and addressing public concerns. The Studio created *Woman/Site*, 1995, a mixed media installation offering an alternative to the concurrent International Women's Congress, hosted by Beijing; and *Property Development*, 1995, a site-specific installation among the ruins of Beijing's recently razed Central Academy of Fine Arts. His work has been the subject of several solo exhibitions, such as *Remembrance of Space: The Works of Sui Jianguo*, Gallery of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing, 1995; and *Meeting the Shadow of 100 Years*, Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne, 1997. Since 1986, his work has been featured in numerous group shows, including *China's New Art Post '89*, Hannart Gallery, Hong Kong, 1996; *A Revelation of 20 Years of Contemporary Chinese Art*, Working People's Cultural Palace, Beijing, 1998; and the *Shanghai Biennial*, Shanghai Art Museum, 2000. Sui Jianguo currently lives and works in Beijing, where he has served as head of the sculpture department at the Central Academy of Fine Arts since 1997.

Yin Xiuzhen

Born in Beijing in 1963, Yin Xiuzhen studied at the Capital Normal University, graduating in 1989 with a degree in oil painting. After completing her degree, Yin began experimenting with other media, showing her first major installation, *Door*, in *Post October 1st*, Zhaoyao Gallery, Beijing, 1994. Her performance-based installation, *Suitcase*, 1995, has been presented in numerous venues, and was included in *Transience: Experimental Chinese Art at the End of the Century*, the David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, Chicago, 1999. In 1996, she was one of the first artists to participate in *The Chinese and American Artists Group Project: Protectors of Water Source*, a series designed to call attention to environmental issues in China. Her work has been featured in several one-person exhibitions, including the installation *Ruined City*, 1996, Capital Normal University Museum, Beijing; and *Building Materials*, 2000, 200 Gertrude Street Gallery, Melbourne, Australia. Yin has also participated in many group shows, such as *At the New Century 1979–1999: Contemporary Art of China Invitational Art Exhibition*, 2000, Chendu Museum of Contemporary Art, Chendu, China; *Virtual and Real*, 2000, Wan Fung Art Gallery, Beijing; and *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Asia Society Galleries, New York, 1998–99. Yin Xiuzhen lives and works in Beijing, and is married to the artist Song Dong.

Zhan Wang

Zhan Wang was born in 1962 in Beijing. After attending the Beijing College of Applied Arts from 1978 to 1981, Zhan worked as a jade carver for two years before entering the Department of Sculpture at Beijing's Central Academy of Fine Arts, where he received his MFA in 1988. His early, experimental sculpture series include *Weightlessness*, 1991, and *Temptation*, which the artist began in 1994. In 1995, Zhan formed the Three Men Studio with artists Sui Jianguo and Yu Fan. Around the same time, the artist began developing his *False Ornamental Rock* series.

Based on rocks found in traditional Chinese gardens, these highly polished steel sculptures have become his creative focus. Zhan's work has been exhibited in several solo shows, including *Zhan Wang: Solo Exhibition*, 2000, at the Galerie Loft, Paris, and *Kong-Ling-Kong: Seduction Series*, 1994, at the Gallery of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing. Zhan has also been included in many group shows, including the *Shanghai Biennial*, 2000, Shanghai Art Museum; *Half a Century of Footprints: Work from Members of the Sculpture Research Department of the Central Academy of Fine Arts*, 1998, the Gallery of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing; and *Twentieth Century: China*, 1991, China Art Gallery, Beijing, China. Zhan Wang currently lives and works in Beijing, where he is employed as a full-time sculptor and instructor at the Central Academy of Fine Arts.

NOTES

- 1 Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 8.
- 2 Nicholas Abraham, "Notes on the Phantom: A Complement to Freud's Metapsychology," trans. Nicholas Rand, *Critical Inquiry* 13 (Winter 1987): 287.
- 3 Kipnis, 1987, quoted in Avery, 15.
- 4 Lê's artwork—from his dazzling "photoweavings" to site-specific installations and public art projects—addresses the horror and tragedies of the American-Vietnam War and Cambodia's legacy of genocide, invoking ghosts to help us rethink the ways we construct our national—and personal—histories. Puranen's photo series, *Imaginary Homecoming*, uses archival photos of the Sami people of his native Finland to raise questions about early photography's relation to ethnography, probing the haunting forces that link the icy Finnish landscape to memory and history. Weems's photoworks and recent installations (in which archival photos and text are printed onto semitransparent muslin, with haunting results) eloquently address issues ranging from the Russian Revolution to the Jewish Holocaust, while Walker's panoramic silhouettes, composed from cut paper, point fiercely to one of America's most troubling ghosts: the legacy of slavery.
- 5 Zhan Wang quoted in Francesca Del Lago, "Space and Public: Specificity in Beijing," *Art Journal* 59 (Spring 2000): 84.
- 6 Wu Hung, *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 81. Exhibition catalog.
- 7 "In China ... one part of the spirit of a deceased person is believed to pass into a special tablet after death. The tablets are placed in a ceremonial room and are bowed to, talked to and fed regularly by their living descendents, quite as if they were living persons. The purpose of these acts is ... to please the ancestors, thereby making sure that they continue to look out for the household and community." Rosemary Ellen Guiley, *The Encyclopedia of Ghosts and Spirits* (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1992), 9.
- 8 During the Maoist era (1949–79), urban residential space was restructured into work-unit compounds, walled communities that functioned like miniature cities, complete with work sites, housing (in three- and five-story brick structures), and recreational areas. Yet with the rise of the work-unit, many *hutongs* and *siheyuan* were left intact. Combining Soviet models with the local building customs, work-units were hybrid forms that mixed Soviet utilitarian sensibilities with the community-based living implicit in the *hutongs*. Though clearly a departure from the *siheyuan*, the work-unit's emphasis on open, common spaces and shared activities kept essential aspects of earlier lifeways intact.
- 9 Song Dong quoted in Francesca Del Lago, "Space and Public," 86.
- 10 See Deng Xiaoping, *Fundamental Issues in Present Day China*, translated by the Bureau for the Compilation and Translation of Works by Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin Under the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1987).

11 Describing this transformation of China's urban centers, geographer Piper Rae Gaubatz writes: "Throughout China's large cities, the construction of new housing since 1978 has focused on the development of completely new residential areas. These municipal and state projects differ from housing developed in the 1960s and 1970s in that they are large-scale high-rise developments designated to house employees of many different work units, whose places of employment are spatially separate from the residential districts. Piper Rae Gaubatz, "Urban Transformation in Post-Mao China: Impacts of the Reform Era on China's Urban Form," in *Urban Spaces in Contemporary China: The Potential for Autonomy and Community in Post-Mao China* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1995), 52.

12 Wu Hung, *Transience*, 114.

13 Michael Roth with Claire Lyons and Charles Merewether, *Irresistible Decay: Ruins Reclaimed* (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 1997), 17. Exhibition catalog.

14 See Celeste Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), 142–6.

15 Roth, Lyons, and Merewether, *Irresistible Decay*, 3–4.

16 These are the ruins seen in Bruno Braquehais's and Alphonse Liebert's photographs of the decimated Paris Commune of 1871 and George N. Bernard's Civil War photos of 1869. By this time, the romantic facade of the "cult of ruins" had crumbled away, giving rise to images that suggested the terrible possibility of sudden, massive destruction.

17 Wu Hung, "Ruins Fragmentation, and the Chinese Modern/ Postmodern," in *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* (San Francisco/New York/Berkeley: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art/Asia Society Galleries/University of California Press, 1998), 60. Exhibition catalog.

18 Yang Hsien-Yi and Gladys Yang, trans., *Stories About Not Being Afraid of Ghosts* (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1961), 51.

19 As Celeste Olalquiaga writes:

"Ruins replace the abstract totality of historical progression—the inscription of an event in the context of chronological continuity—with the concrete fragmentation of historical decay. In them, the continuum of time is materialized by a transformation in space. This shift from time to space, and unity to dispersion, makes the mythical memory concrete, as it abandons the sphere of intellectual cognition for that of sensorial perception—something akin to how photographs 'capture' moments whose temporal evanescence is emphasized by their transcription to a spatial register." Olalquiaga, *Artificial Kingdom*, 145.

20 Wu Hung, "Ruins Fragmentation," 60.

21 "A different kind of ruin image became influential and finally became part of a modern visual culture in China. Instead of inspiring melancholy and poetic lamentation, these images, including images of wars, the Cultural Revolution, and large-scale demolitions of traditional cities, evoke pain and terror. They shook their audience because they register, record, restage, or simulate *destruction*—destruction as violence and atrocity that left a person, a city, or a nation with a wounded body and psyche." Wu Hung, *Transience*, 80.

22 Zhan Wang's unpublished English manuscript, "'94 Action Plan for Debris Salvage: Schemes for Implementation and Results," appears in Wu Hung, *Transience*, 113.

23 Zhan Wang quoted in Francesca Del Lago, "Space and Public," 84.

24 In August 1995, Sui Jianguo, Yu Fan, and Zhan Wang, all young faculty members at the prestigious Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, formed an artists' group called the Three Men Studio. Unlike many of the experimental artists before them, many of whom were either self-taught or who resisted the confines of the institutions after graduating, all three men were rigorously trained sculptors who wanted to address China's social and political climate from *within* the academy. For this reason, the Three Men Studio sought to develop new formal languages to express their concerns to a broad audience. Between the late 1970s and the mid-1990s, much of the experimental art in China was produced by artists working in groups, in part to protect individuals from being singled out by critical governmental officials.

For a detailed account of the reasons artists chose to work in groups, see Julia F. Andrews and Gao Minglu, "The Avant-garde's Challenge to Official Art," in *Urban Spaces in Contemporary China*, 236–8.

25 See Jun Jing, "Male Ancestors and Female Deities: Finding Memories of Trauma in a Chinese Village," in *Disturbing Remains: Memory, History, and Crisis in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Michael Roth and Charles Salas (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute Publications, 2001), 207–26.

26 Guiley, *Encyclopedia of Ghosts and Spirits*, 13.

27 See Chang Tsong-Zung, "To Tame a Barbarian: Sui Jianguo's Clothes Vein Series," www.chinese-art.com/artists/suijianguo, July 30, 2001. Emphasis added.

28 Song Dong quoted in Francesca Del Lago, "Space and Public," 86.

29 *Ibid.*, 86.

30 Wu Hung, *Transience*, 120.

31 For information about these artists, I am indebted to Art Beatus Gallery, Vancouver, Canada (www.artbeat-us.com); Chambers Fine Art, New York (www.chambersfineart.com); Chinese-art.com; Red Gate Gallery (www.redgategallery.com); and Wu Hung, *Transience*.