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Pictorial City: Chinese Urbanism and Contemporary Photography

The City…

The city is not merely a collection of buildings. It must be regarded as an autonomous entity, not only in an architectonic sense but also structurally, economically, politically, socially, and, not least, culturally. It is affected by a multiplicity of factors that are not only space and time-dependent but also constantly in flux. Horizontal spatial expansion, vertical growth, high density, and the range and type of social and economic interactions clearly distinguish the city from rural environments. Cities manifest, for example, a high degree of occupational difference, complex systems of transportation, a multitude of means for communication, and a wide range of public and administrative institutitions. The concept of urbanity is sociologically linked to a way of life involving particular educational ideals, societal openness, and a range of accepted lifestyles that provide exposure to a high level of diversity. In the context of urban architecture, this implies certain spatial structures and varied social zones, but also specific patterns in the use of the space, including its manifold functional differentiation. Besides its sociocultural aspects, urbanization is also a central concept and characteristic behind city planning and development.

… and Photography

Photography has been related to the city ever since its very beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. "In many ways, it is the urban landscape that has perhaps become synonymous with photography,"[1] noted Susan Bright in describing this special relationship between photography and city. One way photography connects to the city is through the capturing of moments on the street, the documenting of a cartography of motion and life. Over the course of the nineteenth, twentieth, or now in the twenty-first century, massive transfigurations of the urban environment—its function and its structures—have taken place, and the classic urban model both in the West and the East has changed as have the aesthetics within in photographic practices necessary to depict these changes. "This new urban development was not easily readable by the camera. The look of buildings and people could mask their functions as much as displaying them. Much of the city's operation had become electronic and therefore invisible. . . . a recognition that the contemporary city can be understood as a kind of palimpsest: while its surfaces may be spectacularly photogenic, underlying them are complex social and political issues,"[2] reflects David Campany, who adds, "The city, modernity, and photography are intimately linked. The modern city understood itself through its own image. . . ."[3]

In China the beginning of photography was rooted in the city as well. Around the 1860s, the first independent photographers' studios and clientele were located in the cities, and the urban environment was a source of their pictorial motifs.[4] Towards the end of the nineteenth century photography had become a leisure activity within the upper classes and remained a privilege for the imperial family, the literati, and others until the beginning of the twentieth century.[5] The earliest exhibition of photography seems to have taken place in 1918 at the University of Beijing, followed by others in Shanghai, which, during the late 1920s and 30s, became a hotspot for fashion, cinema, celebrity, and modern city life—with photography at the centre of the documentation of these activities. In a more recent context, Gu Zheng, in an essay of contemporary photography in China, draws a particular link between this medium and the massive urban social changes that have taken place since the middle of the 1990s.[6]

Some Urban Codes in the Twenty-first Century [7]

China has one of the longest records of uninterrupted urbanization. The origins of the Chinese city, or walled urban centres, can be traced back to almost 3000 B.C. Chinese urban construction was always subject to an extensive set of rules and rituals: this ranged from, according to the rules of *feng shui*, the choice of the right location to build dates deemed suitable, and from the overall layout to construction details for walls, gates, and towers according to the application of cosmological principles and numerology. The symbolism of the Chinese city reflected imperial ideology and was characterized by an emphasis on the centrality of China as the middle kingdom and the Emperor as the son of the heavens. Of these design principles many are, of course, reflected in the arrangement of Chinese cities today. This interlocking of space and tradition is described as follows by Dieter Hassenpflug: "Beyond having regard to the fate of products and ideas that immigrated into China, it should not be overlooked that in the construction of the new China, the old China—and especially imperial China but also that of the Republic and the Mao era—were continued on from within, with endogenous forces."[8] So one can trace fragments of continuity within all the on-going urban transformations.[9]

Until the beginning of the twentieth century, this classical Chinese urban structure underwent little serious alteration and remained, with some exceptions during the time of Mao Zedong, largely stable until the 1980s. In the course of reform under Deng Xiaoping, political, economic, and social changes had a significant impact on urban construction and uses of the city that led to the transformation of urban lifestyles. For example, until the 1990s the communes were the sole owners of land and held the rights to construct on it and use it, and the end of state housing led to the development of new neighbourhoods and the rapid growth of a real estate industry. Furthermore, due to the disbanding of the *danwei* system,[10] the close geographic link between work and residence also disappeared, and this was one of the reasons individual transport increased. The introduction of the five-day week may also be cited as one of the sources for change in city structures; the greater proportion of leisure time has led to corresponding

developments in urban construction, for example, shopping malls. Parallel to these developments has been a continuing increase in the standard of living for an ever-larger number of people with an ever-growing notion of, and desire for, consumerism. Finally, due to these developments urban family structures have also witnessed considerable change.

Urban Fabric

Urban expansion takes place in Chinese cities at two levels: first, vertically, in the centres, with the focus above all on infrastructure and modern prestige construction within the transformation of historical quarters into modern business or shopping areas; second, horizontally, growing outwards, beyond the previous city limits into new satellite settlements. The reasons for these kinds of urban expansion are manifold: the need for new housing facilities, business districts, science parks, commercial spaces, wider roads, etc. In respect to this massive expansion, the approach to town planning plays a major role in urban development. Often a certain sustainability is lacking. Yung Ho Chang criticizes the lack of any planning in urban construction, saying that while many wonderful individual pieces of construction emerge, they do not work together to produce a good city.[11] New construction is seldom integrated into or provides continuity with what already exists. Hou Hanru remarks in this context that projects are usually constructed before any connection to the existing environment, structures, or residents' uses of space is considered—an international phenomenon that is known as "post-planning."[12] Likewise, Linda Vlassenrood characterizes the modern Chinese city as a "city of objects; that is, a collection of iconic high-rises bearing no relation to the direct surrounding."[13] There often seems to be a lack of understanding of how the architecture of buildings can contribute to the quality of urban life, or how the inhabitants might use a special structure or building. Wang Jun attributes this to the fact that ". . . the theories of urbanism applied in Beijing, as in many other Chinese cities, are based on dogmas that have been abandoned elsewhere in recognition of their drastic human and social consequences."[14]

The historic centres of cities provide a well-known example. These were densely populated, had specific social structures, and were more or less ignored for decades by official authorities responsible for city planning—until in many cases the next step was the demolition of whole districts that had become extremely valuable real estate because of their central location. This meant not only that many inhabitants' living spaces were lost, but also that certain traditional construction typologies or specific forms of utilization of long-used urban space were lost. People were resettled away from these spaces—which consisted of mostly two-storey houses—often into high rises at the edge of the city. Here, a contradiction between traditional urban spaces in China and the requirements of the industrial age can be detected. This involves not only change, but also frequently the total loss of social networks, especially as on top of this there is usually no connection to existing urban infrastructure. The historical city is in the process of dissolution, and the dominance of Soviet role models—the

ideology of large squares and axes—is coming to an end, and, in parallel, a postmodern city is emerging.

On the other hand, this new infrastructure caters to the needs of the growing middle class. Economic and political decisions such as the aforementioned introduction of the five-day work week or the disassociation of workplace and dwelling place have led to changes of lifestyle—in the pursuit of leisure and in new social patterns, not everybody wants to live in the classic, narrow courtyard houses. As Hou Hanru and Hans Ulrich Obrist stated in 1997 in their introduction to the exhibition Cities on the Move, these transformations are also "a process of renegotiation between the established social structure and influences of foreign, especially Western, models of social structure, values, and ways of living."[15] Thus, urban culture is by no means formed solely by architectonic influences but is expressed in many other ways as well.

One special visual code evident in today´s Chinese city should be mentioned here—the so-called "urban fictions." These new cityscapes feature the transposition of European urban "architectural ensembles" into the setting of Chinese cities as new residential areas. Hassenpflug explains this as the "mediatizing way China deals with the cultural heritage of the West, specifically of the European city," or as a "landscape of urban stage-setting."[16]

City Moves in Contemporary Photography
Urban motion—changing facades and structures, the demolition and construction of buildings and urban quarters, expansion both vertically and horizontally, the shifting of city boundaries.

While the city changes and moves in both time and space, the people living in it change and move as well. This also entails an emotional effect on the city dweller, for the changes in and of the city move the people living there not only physically in their surroundings, by forcing them perhaps to walk faster in the streets or seducing them into rambling, but also by imposing a new cartography of movement, new patterns in street life. All of this affects the urban inhabitant personally, emotionally, and physically, and leaves traces of both a negative and positive nature in individual lives that can bring about expansion, prosperity, loss, limitation, or diversification.

The goal of Birdhead (Song Tao and Ji Weiyu) in their series *Birdhead World* (2004–05) is to chronicle everyday urban reality, describing the individualized life of young people in Shanghai. Photography is their tool to depict what moves them, to express their subjective impressions and feelings in a city of constant change. "This process of moving from the city of Shanghai to the world of Birdhead is very interesting,"[17] comments Birdhead on their concept of turning the outer world into their personal world. Their pictures often look as if taken by chance on the streets: someone is moving into or out of the frame, heads are partly cropped, and there are blurred, fragmentary image details, reflections of light, etc. The totality of the city is not composed merely of past and present

architecture, but necessarily also of the life of its inhabitants. With their photographs, Birdhead succeeds in directly conveying a sense of being "in the middle of the city," as if we, the viewer, were on the move with them. This is accomplished, for instance, by Birdhead's use of perspective in the pictures—the viewer is at the same height as the photographer and thus gains an impression of being directly with, behind, or next to the protagonists as they make their way through the city.

In the series *Sprinting Forward* (2003–05), Chi Peng depicts naked, running male figures—the artist himself representing these multiple figures— seen from behind, apparently running away from something and finding themselves in various different urban surroundings. The movement is so clearly expressed that it makes the pictures look like they can be read in chronological order as a short story: someone (or several people) running with great urgency out of a building, rushing through the city in the middle of traffic, along wide streets past modern grey architecture, believing perhaps this could be the way to open space, but ultimately coming to an end as they arrive at some steps in front of the impermeable glass facade of a modern building. These movements may represent the idea of searching, but also that of fleeing, perhaps referring to certain social realities, or to personal sensitivities, uncertainties, and insecurities in the face of the social changes in urban life that repeatedly demand balance within one's self. *Sprinting Forward* could thus be read as a reflection or visualization of an inner mental state or simply the restlessness of young people in urban life.

Jiang Pengyi, in his series *All Back To Dust* (2006–07), looks at the phenomenon of the dramatic skyscrapers that have sprouted up in the last decade and that he considers a symbol of China's regained greatness—a symbol of its modernity on the international stage. In his photographs

he depicts modern high-rise buildings, including iconic ones such as the National Center for Performing Arts or the National Art Museum in Beijing. But this architecture is displaced from its urban context and has been miniaturized and recontextualized in a scenario in which they become ordinary waste. He refers above all to construction, to the speed with which these buildings are erected. Areas affected by the demolition in preparation for these towers are only indirectly addressed in that each example of construction often requires destruction beforehand, with both being necessary because the world comes into being only through change.[18] These buildings also generate emotions, inspire awe, seduce, and satisfy needs, not least the desire for spectacle. Diminishing and decontextualizing them counteracts a feeling of unease in the face of rapid change, making reality look not quite so intimidating. It also relativizes the significance of these overpowering buildings: "The grand objects outside are composed of countless microscopic particles. In fact, they are all just piles of dust."[19]

Weng Fen's series *On the Wall* (1999–2002) records views of modern metropolises—the special economic zones of Haikou, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen—taken from a distance to show their monotonous, uniform architecture, which ubiquitously repeats the same forms and facades. In the foreground of each image, a girl in a school uniform straddles a wall looking towards the faraway city skyline. She remains anonymous, and we are given no hint of her thoughts or emotions: Is she yearning for something? Welcoming future opportunities? Experiencing anxiety? Some walls are overgrown with plants, some are slightly cracked, the foreground sometimes unkempt and, thus undeveloped and still lagging behind the new urban China and revealing the gap between promised futures and present realities. Weng Fen has expressed appreciation for the city and its

movements of demolition and new contruction, people and traffic, even though, he says, at times he feels ambivalence: "This rapid development in the city filled me with passion. However, sometimes I did not know where I should begin, and sometimes I was concerned by the speed of the change. On other days I just found it splendid and wonderful. I felt a huge longing to be where things were moving and changing. . . . and maybe the sensation is analogous to how a person feels about modernization. It is all so new for him, and unforeseeable. Although he is confused, he is also full of hope."[20]

Migration

Within the context of China, different forms of migration need to be distinguished. As the importance of traditional agriculture decreases, the cities with their countless new building projects attract a large, continuous, and still-increasing stream of migrant workers. Once they arrive, these migrants largely have no rights, find support only in informal social networks and structures, live illegally in condemned buildings or at ephemeral building sites, and thus are forced to move constantly within the city. While these workers increase the populations of the cities, they don't participate in increasing urbanization in the sense of progressive lifestyles or education, and they are visible evidence of remaining poverty and social inequity. On the other hand, moving to the city in search of work often constitutes the only possibility of sustaining one's own family. Although the circumstances of these workers who make urban growth possible may affect social stability with their infrequent protest, their demands remain largely officially ignored officially thus far.

Another group of migrants are those who officially live and work in the city but, due to the restrictions of the *hukou* registration system,[21] are denied

further rights such as school for their children, social security, or access to certain residential areas. Many move to the city for economic reasons but then exert a different influence by following the course of the growing middle class with active participation in its increasing prosperity.

Last but not least, there is forced migration, or, rather, relocation within the city due to demolition of older residential buildings. All these different forms of migration lead to a constant movement (voluntarily or forced) of people between different places, sometimes resulting in a better living standard while most of the time not.

Residential Areas

Smaller families now inhabit the city (due to the one-child policy and for economic reasons), and this has led to a higher demand for housing. Furthermore, modern urban families are no longer living in one room, and they are not sharing cooking or toilet facilities with other families. Residential construction does sometimes strive to cater to a balancing act between traditional social and cultural values and those of modern China, reflecting an overlap of sociocultural and urban development. The main elements and signs of this in current residential construction are summarized by Hassenpflug: "It [the new Chinese city] is, however, also the city of gated neighbourhoods, inward-facing neighbourhood courtyards, the vertical form, the roof and light sculptures and, not least, the neighbourhood as a lifestyle product with its own trademark identity. . . . In the new gated communities, old and new China are comingled in a new, creative way."[22] The southward orientation of newly constructed flats is still of great importance in this context. A significant element in the internal design of the traditional Chinese city was the orientation according to the four points of the compass, with the highest rank ascribed to the north-south axis. Alignment towards the south was incorporated into the design of temples, halls honouring ancestors, etc., and indeed into the design of the entire city itself, which was aligned along this central axis—a principle that is still practiced today.

Confucian social ethic was manifested in the structure of traditional private housing that faced inwards towards one or more courtyards. Accordingly, an important element of such modern residential developments is the arrangement around a central green space that refers to the traditional Chinese garden and recalls the relative seclusion and inward orientation of a courtyard, with a closed-in spatial character of a semi-private neighbourhood courtyard.

City Ruins in Contemporary Photography

Ruins can assume the form of single buildings or can consist of whole districts that are threatened by demolition or even already demolished, thus affecting the urban fabric, the city structures, the cityscape, and its topography. In growing beyond previous city boundaries, modern construction work can leave a wake of destruction in different ways. Architectonic ruins often carry traces of what they once housed, with

memories and sometimes loss still hanging in the air. The possibilities offered by what is to come as yet play no role, so the past dominates both one's psyche and the landscape. Ultimately, the modern city can have an emotionally ruinous effect: It ruins, it precipitates personal and social uprooting or loneliness, it intensifies isolation in spite of involvement by a society of many. The ever-faster processes driving the new urban reality, lifestyles that may be too focused on consumption, prevailing economic paradigms, homelessness due to re-location or migration, and melancholy arising from familiar social structures that are rapidly becoming transient can leave the public bewildered and lost.

Jiang Zhi's *Things would turn to nails once they happened* (2007)[23] is based on a real event. The picture shows a small house, a future ruin, on top of a small hill, which stands like a memorial on a podium in an already excavated building pit covering several thousands of square metres. In March 2007, this brick construction in Yangjiaping (Chongqing) suddenly recieved national and international attention. Already cut off from the water and electricity supply, with no path connecting it to the surroundings, this house became an emblem for the ruthlessness of the construction industry in urban China. The owners refused to relocate or to sell their property under unfair conditions. For three years they resisted demolition under the most adverse circumstances and delayed the building of a planned shopping mall.[24] Jiang Zhi further intensified this already symbolic image by very simple means—using a floodlight to dramatically illuminate the house at night. This strong yet ethereal beam of light produced a sort of gloriole, highlighting an example of insistence on one's rights, of the refusal to yield in the midst of ruins, and emphasizing that something worthy of attention was happening amid these ruins.

Jiang Zhi, *Things would turn to nails once they happened*, 2007, C print, 150 x 200 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Long March Space, Beijing.
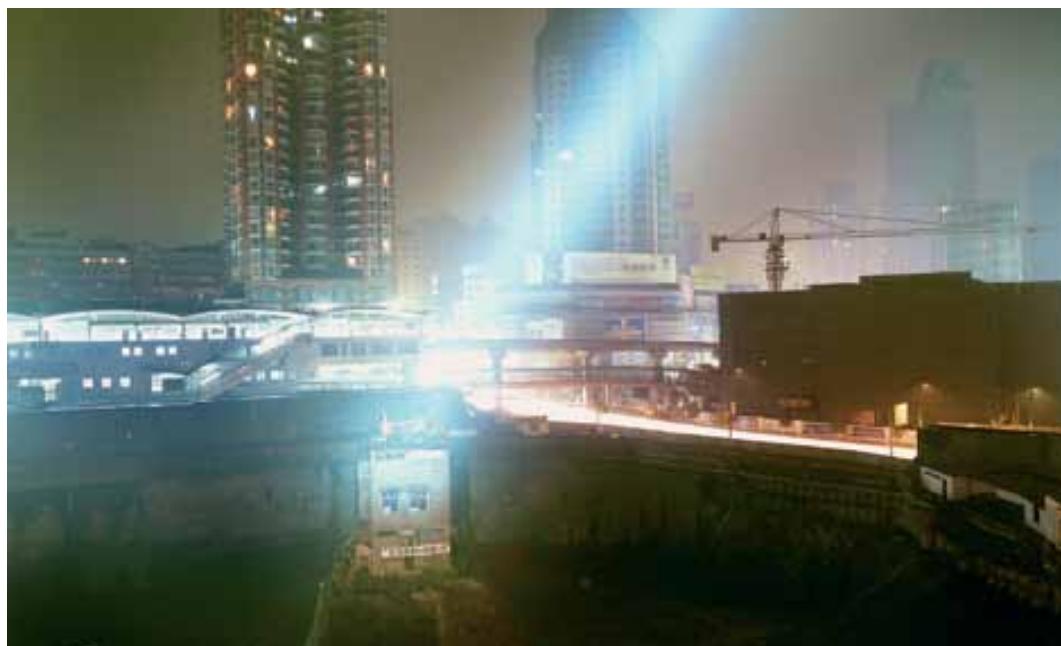
RongRong has several times addressed the consequences of the demolition of city districts in his work. *Untitled* (1996–97), a series Wu Hung referred to as *Ruin Pictures*,[25] shows remnants of traditional residential houses in Beijing with their semi-demolished walls, the destroyed shells of what were once homes, and personal leftovers strewn about in the debris. In the

centre of *Untitled No. 10*, the peeling remains of wall posters can be seen—showing perhaps film stars or some other admired celebrities—engendering an exposed, yet almost intimate look into these rooms that were previously the site of lives being lived. These spaces have been transformed into a heap of rubble, leaving behind a place that has obviously long been abandoned by its former residents. There are no people in these pictures, only traces of them. Oddly, while the images have a ghostly quality, there is no sense of melancholy; they simply focus on loss and destruction.
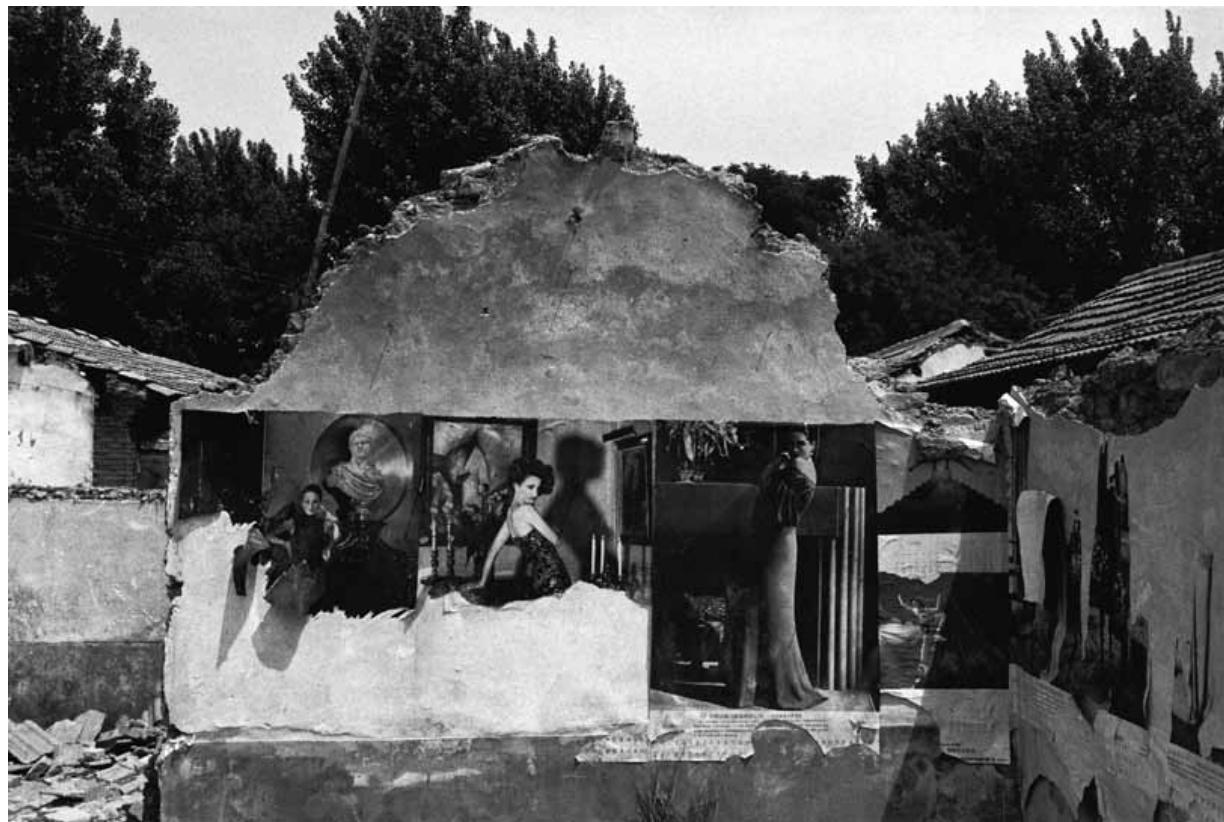
At first glance, the *Urban Fiction* series by Xing Danwen presents modern apartment complexes that stand as promising symbols of the economic success newly experienced by the rising Chinese middle class. Architectural models used as condo sales promotion are shown, representing an image of the purposeful modernity of urban life, with the physical ruins of what was here before already removed and replaced, unlike earlier works I have discussed. These pictures do not overty show anything auspicious, but the ideal living conditions that are promoted by these models begin to crack the longer one looks at them; behind these facades, no lively or worthwhile future unfolds. Small, discrete scenes emerge revealing forlornness and terror within city life—a couple fighting, a male corpse lying in a pool of blood, lonely people isolated on the street with no others to accompany them in the cold, sterile light. Xing Danwen has stated: "With this work, I have brought my vision and perspectives to these urban spaces. . . . You start to wonder: Is this the picture of life today? Do we really live in this kind of space and environment?"[26] People in cities once lived beside each other, and now they are on top of each other; unlike the horizontal community of the *hutong,* this is a vertical kind of living where people are separated from each other in little boxes. Here, physical upheaval is followed by psychological upheaval.

In the series *Uprooted* (2007-2008), Yang Yi addresses the demolition of his hometown, Kaixian.[27] Through digital technology, the pictures show completely submerged stumps, remnants of buildings, flats, streets, and figures in their everyday life. These images do not yet herald a new beginning, but are wholly the result of loss, uprootedness, the state of having been violently torn away from long-established communities. In the words of the artist: "One morning . . . I woke up in a sweat. . . . I come and go along these familiar alleys. I revisit my old school, the dazzle of lights emanating from the cinema, the riverside where I used to swim, the rooftops where I once went to get a breath of fresh air, the winding pathways. . . . All is in darkness, unattended, there are no friends or relatives to be found anywhere. Where do all of these bubbles and floating objects come from? . . . In taking these photographs, I had to hold my breath and, once taken, would make my escape. I don't intend to dwell on the meaning to be found in my photography. What is important for me is that I came from that town. . . . In 2009 . . . Kaixian, the 1800 years of my childhood home's history, was expunged. . . . On that day, I will awake underwater."[28]

Urban Spaces

Public space does not mean only urban (physical) outside space to which no specific function has been assigned. Often this space is of direct or indirect social/political importance; it can, after all, be the expression of a civil society, offer a venue for assembly, or simply facilitate general social gatherings outside of private space. Traditionally, this type of public space has not been avaiable to people in Chinese cities (in contrast to public space for markets, traders, and similar activities of everyday life). Confucian principles and values focused on private life and the family structured everyday life. Public places in traditional Chinese cities had other functions; for example in Beijing, Tian'anmen Square was used for coronations and
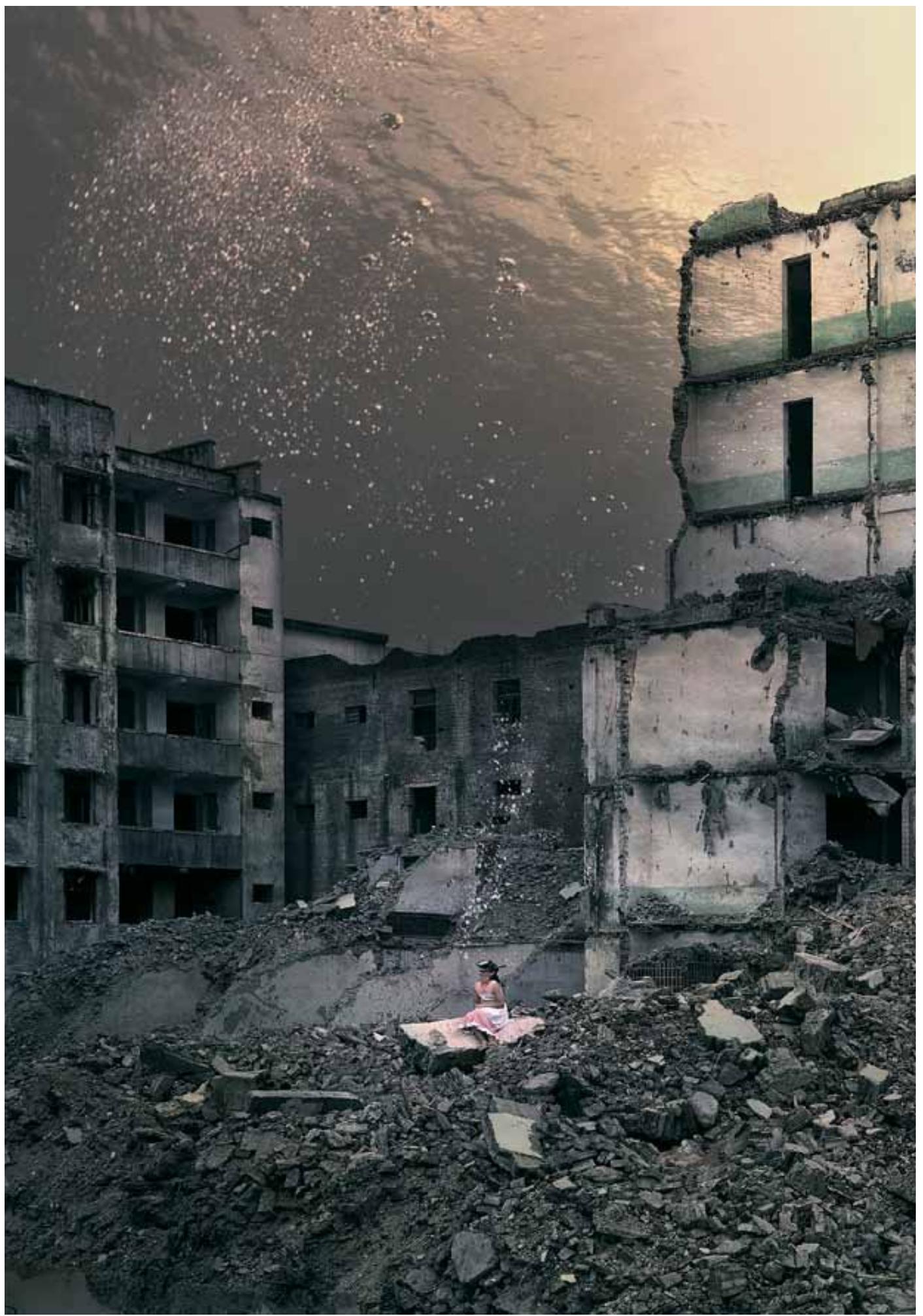
Yang Yi, *Uprooted–06, Nanjiao Dormitory*, 2007, digital photograph, 105 x 150 cm.
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Paris-Beijing, Beijing.

victory celebrations, for parades and national festivities, spring festivals, and so on. These political public spaces were not made to sojourn in and can clearly be distinguished from commercial public spaces. Beside these public spaces exist what Hassenpflug describes as "open space," a space outside of family and community, outside of work and educational areas, a space that "is still primarily non-space or "nowhere," a blank urban space with the most functional significance . . . a space that has to be crossed or overcome in order to enter a meaningful space again in the end."[29] Another way of giving meaning to this open space is to experience it semi-privately. This semi-private use of public space can be seen, for instance, in the fact that once-private activities such as drying laundry, playing mahjong, or having an afternoon nap have moved into the urban street.

While the use and meaning of public and open spaces are renegotiated and private as well as commercial buildings are increasingly replacing these spaces, there is as a result less space and structure for non-commercial art and culture. This was already noted by Hou Hanru in 1997 and can still be observed today.[30] After the demolition of East Village in 1994, a former village at the once eastern border of Beijing where important early performances and experimental art activities had taken place, the industrial zone of the 798 district in Beijing was redefined as a place for avant-garde art. Since then, this thriving art district has more or less completely turned into a commercial enterprise. Artists more recently moved further east, where they have occupied and built spaces in the village of Caochangdi. Yet, in spring of 2010, the first owners to move there received a municipal note saying that Caochangdi has been put into the Beijing Land Reserve Program, and demolition is again a threat as the city incrementally expands.

Olympic Games

In the context of the Olympic games, Hou Hanru has taken a critical look at the city, its structures, and urban life in the twenty-first century. According to him, the fact that Beijing was awarded the Olympic games led to a "fervent rush towards urban expansion and construction of new architectural landmarks . . . in order to transform the ancient capital city . . . into a veritable global metropolis."[31] He views the 3-D simulations connected with the architectural presentations as problematic: "Fiction replaces reality. . . . There's no longer any difference between fiction and the city. . . . Suddenly, one sees a division of the city: one that is real for those who can afford it but fictive for those who cannot. . . . For the benefit of the minority who claim to be creating a new and upgraded life for the rest of the population, others are forced to accept the fiction as the reality and to give up land where generations of their families have lived and laboured."[32]

He considers the development in the Dazhalan quarter of Beijing to be a particularly flagrant example of the "violence of urban gentrification." For centuries a commercial centre that included small trades, handicrafts, teahouses, and prostitution, this area was neglected from the 1990s onward and ultimately deteriorated into a slum. In the course of the preparations for the Olympics, it was resolved that the quarter should be transformed

into an authentic Chinese tourist attraction; however, it was not renovated, but, instead, completely demolished and essentially re-erected as a mock-up of a traditional city quarter, with tourist and service businesses, and the original inhabitants were sent to the outskirts of the city. He notes that such destruction is not a new phenomenon of the twenty-first century but also took place earlier—driven, for instance, by "socialist revolutionary ideology and its radical form of achieving modernity."[33]

City Plays in Contemporary Photography

The city plays—but with whom, for whom, and to what end, and which games does it play? And who are the players, who are the audiences, or, indeed, the voyeurs? For whom or what does the city serve as a background, as a theatrical stage, as a setting for the architectonic, social, cultural, economic, or personal dramatic productions? The following musings about the artistic works are less about any kind of visual sociology than about having a closer look at the surfaces of city life, of buildings, at iconic buildings, their accessible aesthetics, and their political and/or commercial connotations. They are also about urban fictions, international forms of architecture that are supposed to function without any relationship to their respective specific surroundings or histories, hybrid spaces, productions of urban identities/individualities, and urban flotsam associated with these various aspects of the modern city.

Chen Shaoxiong, *The Third Street, Gedachtniskirche Berlin,* 2001. C print, 80 x 120 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

The Third Street, Gedächtniskirche Berlin (2001), by Chen Shaoxiong, could be viewed as a kind of street photography with an abundance of visual information, with different elements that intertwine in ways that do not seem to fit together and that interweave themselves into a jumble of urban props against the city backdrop. For this work, Chen Shaoxiong took photographs in the streets of Guangzhou of vehicles, passers-by, rubbish bins, traffic signs, billboards, and so on. These elements in the photographs were subsequently cut out and arranged as props in a three-dimensional "photo-collage," as though they were on a stage, to create a new scene. In the next step, the then-fictive Chinese panorama was photographed once more, this time against the background of real European metropolises. These interchanges of media, spatial dimension, layers of time, real and self-

made objects, Chinese and European places, produce a fictive conglomerate, a completely new urban stage. Chen Shaoxiong described his thoughts on this topic thus: "Everything in this city is temporary. . . . As a witness myself, I would like to keep the memory of my life inside my built-up small-scale country, or to build a scenery monument for this ever changing city."[34] In this work, the focus is on the street life and social interactions and the stage settings behind them.

The urban fiction resulting from transposing European urban architectural ensembles or codes to Chinese cities is the focus of Liu Gang's *Better Life—At Shanghai* (2010), the title which refers to the slogan of the World Expo in Shanghai in 2010. Liu Gang considered the settings of several of these new cityscapes, many of them intended to function as promising residential areas for the rising middle class. Among such satellite towns that have been built around Shanghai, for instance, is Anting Neustadt, designed to represent the German city, New Amsterdam; or Thames Town, creating the image of an English city. The success of these towns—in the sense that they were expected to be accepted by future inhabitants—has varied greatly, with many of them having become ghost towns. What they are often used for is a destination for a visit, a weekend trip to experience scenery like Disney-world, to a "landscape of urban stage-setting";[35] thus these towns have become a part of the urban spectacle. For Liu Gang, this development reveals the gap between economic and cultural development. Buying culture or style is just an aspect of financial ability, but culture needs more time to evolve and requires deeper reflection and understanding.

In *Theatre* (2007), Miao Xiaochun reveals a quasi-reversed hierarchical order of the pictorial elements. The renowned National Center for Performing Arts, one of the iconic buildings that was constructed in the course of modernizing Beijing prior to the 2008 Olympics, is seen only

as a background component of the picture; that is, it is not at the centre of this particular urban stage. Its grey dome looming in the background is not immediately recognized, and it represents nothing more than an appendage against the urban story that unfolds in the foreground along a narrow street in a *hutong*. Here, the public goes about its everyday business with the spectacle of the National Center for Performing Arts making little impact. Miao Xiaochun comments on this work as follows: "Looking at the almost completed National Center for Performing Arts from a traditional *hutong* in Beijing, it looks as strange as an alien being from outer space. It is like a spacecraft landed from nowhere; with its extremely futuristic style, it is 'embedded' in the heart of this ancient city, showing a sense of magical realism. . . . How can such a scene not impress or fascinate people and make people fantasize? The drama happening right here is no less dramatic than the operas and plays which will soon take place here in the near future."[36]

Miao Xiaochun, *Theatre*, 2007, C print, 197 x 480 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

All the images in Yang Zhenzhong's series *Light as Fuck* (2002–03) were taken in different parts of Shanghai, and all show a similar motif: A person stands on a street and balances something impossible on his or her fingertip, for example, a stone lion, a heavy piece of construction machinery, or iconic architecture such as Shanghai's well-known Oriental Pearl Tower. These people do not seem to worry about their task; they manage it as if in play, and the objects appear weightless. So is modern urban life light and easy; that is, comparatively simple to manage? Yang Zhenzhong approaches different aspects of urban reality ostensibly with humour as the speed of economic, architectonic, and social change seems even to defy the law of gravity. This work can also be interpreted as pointing to the desire to cope more easily, indeed playfully, with the reality of this change. Behind the seemingly simple poses of these urban dwellers lies the artist's spirit of criticality: "In most Chinese cities, a lot of buildings have been demolished. . . . It is easy to get lost in a once familiar street within weeks. . . . The image of the city in our memories becomes lighter, no more weight of history. . . . When the sights in a city no longer bear historical significance, its images in my memory will become more and more misty (light). Such cities, like Shanghai, make people feel excited and depressed."[37]

In the work of these artists and their choice of motifs and visual strategies, urban photography is inseparable from social transformation. Photography has become an appropriate means to address speed and change in the social, economic, and architectonic fabric of the city, to express one's own state of
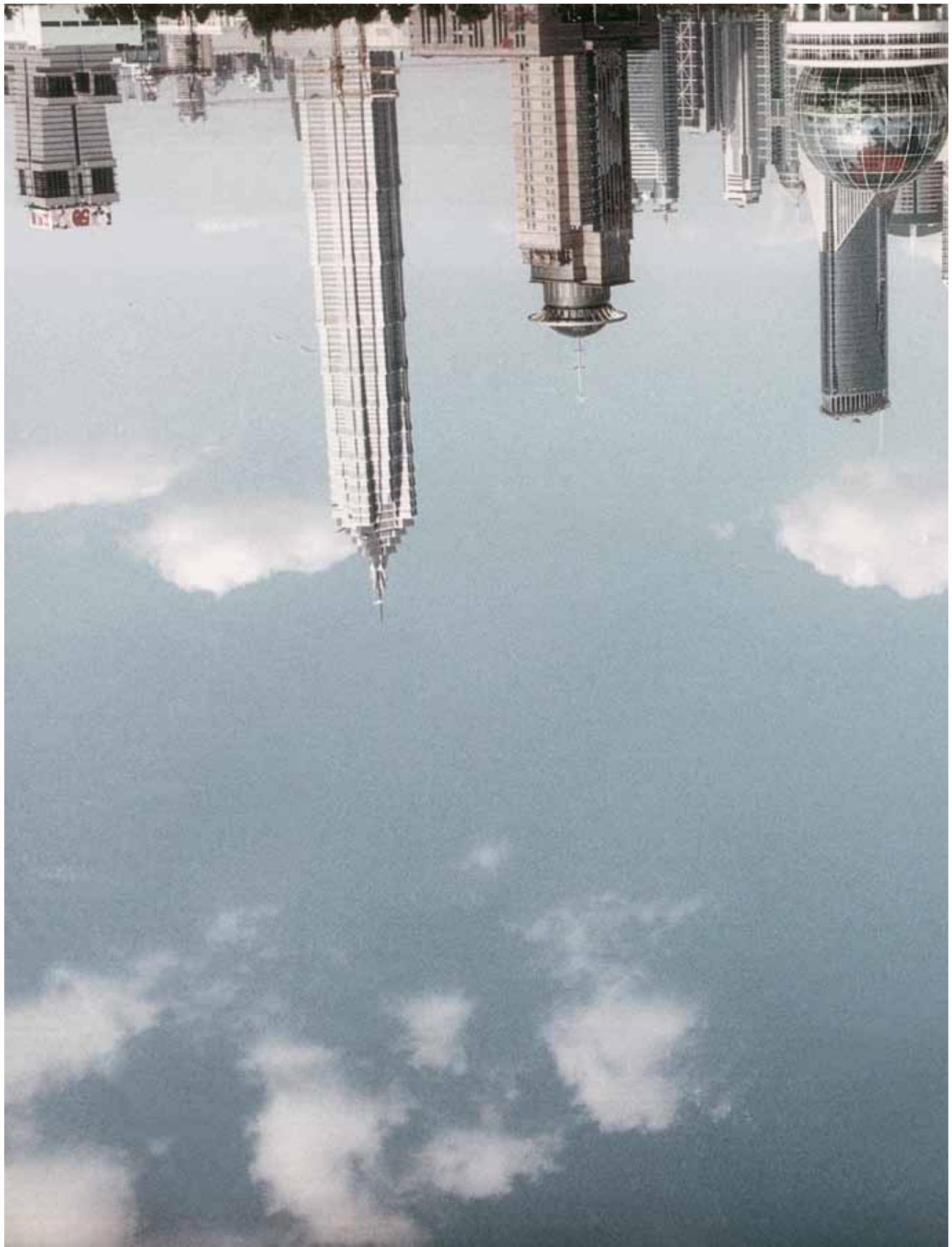
mind or upset.[38] The artists' perspectives on the city are very different from each other, on one occasion definitively apolitical, purely self-related, with sometimes laconic statements about the status quo, on another critically commenting on development, or almost so cursory as to record the changes merely in a quasi-documentary fashion, expressing notions of anxiety, hope, passion, and bewilderment.

Yang Zhenzhong, *Light as Fuck*, 2002, C print, 182 x 120 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Notes

[1] Susan Bright, *Art Photography Now* (Heidelberg: Edition Braun Wachter Verlag, 2008), 16.

[2] David Campany, *Kunst und Fotografie* (Berlin: Phaidon Press, 2005), 13.

[3] Ibid., 110.

[4] Xu Xiaoyu, "Die Entwicklung der Fotografie in China," in Neuer Berliner Kunstverein (Hg.), *Zeitgenössische Fotokunst aus der Volksrepublik China* (Heidelberg: Edition Braus, 1997), 25.

[5] Shi Baoxiu, "Die Darstellung des Menschlichen in der chinesischen Fotografiegeschichte," in Museum für Moderne Kunst Frankfurt, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, Bayrische Gemäldesammlungen München, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden (Hg.), *Humanism in China, Ein fotografisches Portrait* (Heidelberg: Edition Braus im Wachter Verlag), 33.

6   "Gu Zheng: A Theory of Chinese Personal Photography," in John Millichap, ed., *3030: New Photography in China* (Hong Kong: 3030 Press, 2006), 14ff.

7   Within this essay various aspects of the Chinese city in the twenty-first century as well as the plurality of artistic approaches within contemporary photography that address urban development and the manifold related consequences are depicted. It is not about a sociological, architectural, or other scholarly debates; for example, theories concerning the modern Chinese city like Rem Koolhaas´s concept of the "City of Exacerbated Difference" are not further looked into. Also, there are some further urban codes than that mentioned here, for example, the eclecticism of architecture, the iconography of advertising in public spaces, and aspects of urban social makeup such as the growing number of Internet cafes or the changes in wedding ceremonies.

8   Dieter Hassenpflug, *Der Urbane Code Chinas* (Basel/Berlin: Birkhauser Verlag, Bauverlag Gütersloh, 2009), 3.

9   Within the topos of change in the Chinese context, reference must be made in particular to the *Book of Change*, the *Yijing*. The book describes a basic principle of necessity of change as well as acceptance of change. The world in all its forms emerges from permanent changes of the two polar (not dualistic in the sense of countervailing but rather in a complementary sense) fundamental forces yang and yin. These changes offer both opportunities and risks; they do not represent fate as they can be influenced. In this flux, "time" is simply a change of a constellation of the forces, i.e., it is not something that is passive and passes by but an active factor that brings about events. In this context, it is also important to do what best agrees with the respective time quality, for example to go with the times, wait for the right time, etc. The change in/of the city in itself is thus not necessarily a problem, but rather the speed with which which existed disappears, leaving a gap in the continuum.

10 The place of employment was called *danwei* (work unit). As people also lived where they worked, the *danwei* system shaped and controlled the everyday life of its inhabitants (for example, the provision of food, permission for marriage, etc.).

11 Cristina Bechtler, *Art and Cultural Policy in China: A Conversation between Ai Weiwei, Uli Sigg, and Yung Ho Chang*, moderated by Peter Pakesch (Wien: Springer Verlag, 2009), 45.

12 Hou Hanru, "Living With(in) the Urban Fiction: Notes on Urbanization and Art in Post-Olympic China," in *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 8, no. 3 (May/June 2009), 17.

13 Linda Vlassenrood, "Making Change Sensible," in Els Brinkman (Hg.), *China Contemporary: Architecture, Art, Visual Culture* (Rotterdam: NAi Uitgev, 2006), 47.

14 Jun, "Impact of the Olympic Games on the city of Beijing," in Frédéric Edelmann, ed., *In the Chinese City: Perspectives on the Transmutations of an Empire* (Barcelona/New York: Actor Publications, 2009), 338.

15 Hou Hanru and Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Cities on the Move," in *Cities on the Move* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Verlag gerd Hatje, 1997), section 1.

16 Hassenpflug, *Der urbane Code Chinas*, 16.

17 www.shanghartgallery.com/galleryarchive/texts/id/1077.

18 See my remarks on the *Book of Change*.

19 *Jiang Pengyi* (Beijing: Paris-Beijing Photo Gallery, 2008).

20 Heinz Norbert Jocks, "Weng Fen. Sehnsuchtsblicke in die Großstadtmoderne," *Kunstforum International* 194 (November–December 2008), 214.

21 Within the *hukou* system in China, every household is officially registered. This record identifies a person as a resident of an area and can barely be changed. One of the consequences for migrant workers lies in the fact that in living outside their officially registered area they have no official access to government services, etc.

22 Hassenpflug, *Der Urbane Code Chinas*, 14.

23 Part of the *Light* series, *Things would turn to nails once they happened* (2008) also integrates a conceptual and performative approach.

24 Hou Hanru, "Living With(in) the Urban Fiction," 14.

25 Wu Hung, "From Six Mile Village to Three Shadows," Feng Boyi, Mao Weidong, Bridget Noetzel eds., *Compound Eye: Works by RongRong & inri, 2000-2010* (Beijing: He Xiangning Art Museum, 2010), 178. Wu Hung, *Transcience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Hong Kong: University Chicago Press, 2005 [revised edition]), 117.

26 www.danwen.com/web/works/uf/statement.html.

27 Kaixian is one of about thirteen towns that were flooded in the process of the construction of the Three Gorges Dam. It was rebuilt at a new location.

28 *Yang Yi*, (Beijing: Paris-Beijing Photo Gallery, 2008).

29 Hassenpflug, *Der Urbane Code Chinas*, 30.

30 Hou Hanru and Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Cities on the Move," section 4.

31 Hou Hanru, "Living With(in) the Urban Fiction," 8.

32 Ibid., 12.

33 Ibid., 14.

34 www.chenshaoxiong.com/article/article_en/article_en_08.htm.

35 Hassenpflug, *Der Urbane Code Chinas*, 16.

36 www.miaoxiaochun.com/zhongwenyemian/yishujiazishu/yju.htm.

37 www.yangzhenzhong.com/?p=1545&lang=en.

38 This applies also to the simultaneous presence of video, multimedia art, etc.