RUINS AS AUTOBIOGRAPHY
Chinese photographer Rong Rong

Rong Rong arrived in Beijing in 1992 with wide-open eyes and a newly purchased camera. A farm boy from the southeastern province of Fujian, he had never left home before. He was skilled in the fields, but had failed almost every course in elementary and junior high school except for studio art. He had made three attempts to enter a local art school, but was not granted admission (mainly because of his poor performance in math and other general exams). By chance, he discovered photography and developed a passion for it. First, he rented a double-lens camera, which he used to take portraits of his sisters and landscape shots. He then struck a bargain with his father, the manager of a small grocery shop, to work as his employee for three years in exchange for the freedom to leave home, and a sum of money with which to start a new life. So this was how he got his own camera and went to Beijing, which by then had become a Mecca for young avant-garde artists throughout the country.

In Beijing, Rong Rong attended photography classes and became quite good at making the kind of arty, sentimental pictures favored by popular photography magazines. One of his pictures even found its way into a national photography exhibition. But life was hard, and the occasional public exposure of his pictures offered little financial return. When his savings were gone, he tried various odd jobs, including taking passport photos in a commercial studio. He changed addresses frequently, often guided by the cheapest housing on the market. In early 1993, he moved into a tumble-down village on the city's eastern fringe. Later known as Beijing's "East Village" (Dong cun), it would become home to an artistic community that produced some of the most daring works (mainly performance and photography) in contemporary Chinese art before it was closed down by the police in June 1994.

Looking back, Rong Rong can see that his life—both as an artist and as an individual—started from the East Village. His moving there was coupled with his divorcing himself from the kind of popular photographic style that had earned him a place in magazines and official exhibitions. Beside the hard-to-beat monthly rent (60 yuan, or $12, for a shared room), the Village attracted him because of its ugliness and anonymity. He explored the secrets of its refuse-filled dirt roads and courtyards with his camera, his young face and bare torso occasionally reflected in broken windows in his pictures. As his friendship with other bohemian artists, musicians, and writers in the Village deepened, he also began to photograph them: the rock poet-singer who called himself Curse (Zuzhou), the tough-faced performance artist Zhang Huan, the unfailingly sympathetic painter Little Duan (Duan Yingmei), the narcissistic cross-dresser Ma Liuming.

In 1994, after Rong Rong had lived there for more than a year, there was a burst of collective creativity in the Village: without much planning, a number of performance artists and photographers staged joint projects from May 31 to June 13, 1994. The centerpieces of
these activities—Ma Liuming’s *Fen* & Ma Liuming’s *Lunch* and Zhang Huan’s 12 Square Meters and 65 Kilograms, among others—have by now become “classics” of avant-garde Chinese performance art in the 1990s. These performances became known to the outside world largely through Rong Rong and Xing Danwen’s photos, which appeared in the same year in an untitled, underground publication known as *Hetishu* (A Book with a Black Cover). Although the authorship of these photographs was sometimes acknowledged, the images served mainly to illustrate the performances. Even today, historians of contemporary Chinese art rarely speak about the independent importance of these photographs.

But these photographs are significant not just because they documented those powerful performances, but also because they signified a new kind of photography in China. After years of struggling, photographers like Rong Rong, Xing Danwen, and Zhuang Hui had finally broken away from the insulated world of "artistic photography" (*yishu sheying*), making their art an intimate component of ongoing avant-garde experiments. Common to these young artists was an intimate relationship between photography and performance. This relationship, which was especially vital to Rong Rong, would underlie all his later works, but in different forms.

Two blows, one external and the other internal, finally destroyed the East Village artistic community. First, after Ma Liuming’s performance on June 13, 1994, the police arrested some members of the community because of the performance’s alleged obscenity, and kicked out other Village artists from their rented farmhouses. After this Chinese “East Village” became known to the international art circle through photographs, the authorship (and also the ownership) of these photographs became an issue of bitter dispute among some of the Village artists. They argued over whether these images simply recorded the creativity of performance artists or whether they should be considered creative works of the photographers. Intensified by the desire for status and financial gain, this dispute turned old friends and comrades into competitors and enemies.

Disillusioned, Rong Rong eventually stopped collaborating with performance artists. But his interest in performance remained and developed into various autobiographical modes. After the East Village community dispersed, he returned to Fujian, tracing his childhood memories with new vision. He increasingly appeared before his camera, acting while recording his acts, the strong performance quality of these photos resonated with his personal life. Returning to Beijing, he discovered a bond with half-demolished houses, which provided the rapidly developing city with a major visual spectacle throughout the 1990s. He was especially attracted by the torn images of glamorous pinups left on the broken walls. Going one step further, he became fascinated with the fragility of printed images in general, which reminded him of his own vulnerability as a photographer.

Several times I have sat with Rong Rong in his studio, looking through the photographs he has produced over the past seven or eight years. It has become clear to me that despite the disparate subjects of these images, they all include the master figure of *nuns*. Whether a destroyed house or a piece of abandoned furniture, a torn poster or a cut-up film negative, the incompleteness of these images declares loss and propels the viewer to imagine the photographer’s life and psyche. It is in this spirit that I have chosen the following ten photos for this essay. Derived from sets of photographs made in different periods, they testify to a consistent pursuit of a visual language to express what the photographer sees and feels. To these photos I add my observations and Rong Rong’s own accounts, which most vividly reveal the autobiographical nature of the images.
PICTURE 1
ENTERING THE VILLAGE

Taken in 1994, this photo shows the entrance to the East Village. A roadside sign identifies the place in both Chinese and English; the ink is still fresh. The sign stands on a mound of rubbish behind a windowless house. Posters on the wall advertise secret cures for venereal diseases. A pick-up tricycle is passing by: a villager has collected some junk and is on his way to sell it for a few bucks.

The Village's official name is actually Dashan Zhuang—literally the Manor on a Big Hill, though there is neither a hill nor a manor. After some wandering artists from the provinces made this place their home, they called it the East Village, obviously inspired by its namesake on the other side of the globe. Karen Smith, a writer and art critic based in Beijing, has described the environment of the place in the early 1990s as follows:

In the shadow of the metropolis, many of the Village’s indigenous population scrape a living by collecting and sorting rubbish. Waste accumulates by the side of the small ponds. This pollutes the water, generating noxious fumes in the summer. Raw sewage flows directly into the water. Slothful, threadbare dogs roam the narrow lanes between houses. People stare with the blankness of the illiterate and benighted.

Smith’s account qualifies the Village as a “place of death,” the kind of area I have termed wastelands: poisonous spaces filled with garbage, graveyards of dead objects that reject disintegration, “black holes” in an urban landscape that absorb time and escape change. Differing from the ruins lamented in romantic poetry and painting, a wasteland never inspires sentiment or stirs up memory. Instead, it is a contagious corpse, suffocating the living with its deadly excrement.

Viewed from this perspective, Rong Rong’s moving into the Village did not just satisfy his need for cheap housing, his renewed creativity there must be considered the consequence of a voluntary self-exile. He and other Village artists were fully conscious of the “hellish” qualities of the Village in contrast to the “heavenly” downtown Beijing. As Rong Rong recalled in a May 1998 interview: “It was merely a fifteen-minute bicycle ride from the center of the city to my place—from the light-illuminated Great Wall Hotel to the pitch-black East Village: the experience was like traveling from heaven to hell.”

This contrast energized him, however, for he and other Village artists saw themselves as fallen angels who had finally found freedom in this place of darkness.
PICTURE 2  
PHOTOGRAPHING PERFORMANCE

The ambivalence toward making hell a home was best articulated by the Village artist Zhang Huan, who, in his performances, consistently reduced himself to the surrounding waste. And Rong Rong’s photographs best capture Zhang’s masochism; the absence of the photographer in these images attests to his existence as an invisible gaze. When Zhang Huan performed *12 Square Meters*—a project in which he stayed in a filthy public toilet for an hour with flies covering his naked body—Rong Rong was in the same toilet with his camera. The next day, he wrote excitedly to his younger sister:

Dear Sis,

What’s going on here is just unthinkable. Let me tell you why. We were planning a performance project. Zhang [Huan] chose to do this piece of work in a public toilet in the Village (the dirtiest and smelliest in the world). This is what he was going to do: He would place himself in the middle of the john, naked, with some foul-smelling substance and honey covering his body. As a result, a huge swarm of flies would stick to his body. He would sit still for an hour.

At 11:30 a.m. yesterday, Zhang began this while Curse, Ma [Linning], and Terror were witnessing the whole event. We even had a man with a video camera on the scene. Terror spread the stuff on Zhang’s body. In no time at all, flies were attracted. I had a rag to cover my mouth and nose (quite like a gas mask). You know how it stinks in the Johns here, and the temperature then was 100°C Fahrenheit. The bugs soon covered Zhang’s body, his face, penetrated his nostrils and ears. Everything was so still, one could only hear flies flapping their wings and my camera clicking.

Then the news [of what we were doing] got out and led to a public outcry. After Zhang had finished, he stepped into a small pond behind the toilet. Lots of dead flies floated on the water, moving slightly with the smooth circular waves around Zhang’s straight body. Zhang called the whole thing “12 square meters,” which is, of course, the size of the public toilet. He said that the squalid condition of the john and the army of flies in it gave him the inspiration. Some local villagers voiced their concerns by calling what we did yesterday pornographic.

So, to Rong Rong the event was a collaborative undertaking rather than a one-man show: it was “we” who “did [it] yesterday.” This view seems to be confirmed by an early statement from Zhang Huan, published in *Heipishu*, in which he says he conceived the project only “to experience his essential existence” in the toilet and did not mention the “bathing” part at all. But Rong Rong’s camera followed Zhang after he emerged from the toilet and walked into the pond. The sequence of his photos, showing Zhang gradually disappearing in the water, gives the performance a poignant and unforgettable ending.
June 15, 1994

Dear Sis,

Things are so messed up now. I'm in hiding and can't go back to the Village. It was totally unexpected when the police detained Ma [Liming], Zhu Ming, and Little Duan. I can't believe this!

On June 11, around noon, Zhang [Huan] chained and hung himself from the ceiling. Two doctors from the Union Hospital arrived with medical equipment, letting blood drip from his neck onto a heated metal box on an electrical stove. The whole process lasted for an hour. The room was crowded with a viewing audience—foreigners, art critics, and photographers. The smell of fresh and burnt blood filled the room and made everyone feel death was approaching. You are lucky to have missed it—even now my hair and clothes still smell of blood. We had supper in a restaurant in the Village that evening. Seven or eight tables were lined up with people sitting on both sides. Everyone was drunk, still in awe of the spectacle of Zhang's performance. No one knew that it was going to be our "last supper" in the Village. . . .

Rong Rong recorded this performance by Zhang Huan called 65 Kilograms. But he also did something more: making sure the police were not around, he returned to the Village and photographed the now empty room where Zhang had staged his performance. The stains of blood on the mattress seemed still moist. The chains Zhang used to hang himself were coiled on the mattress, snake-like. Some broken dolls lay next to the chains; Zhang had collected and used them for an earlier performance, Weeping Angels. As Rong Rong had written, 65 Kilograms "made everyone feel death was approaching." This photo of his shows the aftermath of death—the end of the East Village artistic community.
PICTURE 4
RECLAIMING THE PAST

Homeless, and with some of his closest friends in jail, Rong Rong left Beijing for Fujian. No joy brightened this trip of homecoming. The family's old house looked even older and shabbier, and so did his parents, relatives, and neighbors. The smell of mildew, a natural element of this southern climate, now seemed too overwhelming and omnipresent. Rong Rong roamed around. The hills and ponds were the same but no longer attracted him to climb up or jump in. The only thing that made his heart suddenly twitch was a piece of old furniture; it also became the only object that he photographed over and over on this trip.

He saw it when he walked into an unused room on the second floor in his old home: an enormous, traditional-style bed with a canopy frame and screen-railings enclosing three sides. It was empty and dusty: his parents had long abandoned it for a more comfortable "Western-style" bed. Stripped of curtains and bedding, its timber structure was exposed full view. Certain parts of it—especially the bottom of the carved canopy posts—were shiny and dark from years of caresses. The screen-railings bore scratches, showing marks of tiny fingernails. Rong Rong recognized some scratches as coming from his own hands. He also remembered that he used to jump up and down in this bed while holding the canopy posts. He recalled that when he was a little boy he slept in this bed with his parents. His two younger sisters later joined him, all crawling in down at their parents' feet.

These instantaneous recollections identify this old bed as an yi wu—a Chinese term meaning "remnant from the past." In traditional literature, yi wu refers to possessions left behind by a bygone subject, either a person, a family, or a dynasty. But generally, an yi wu is always a surviving portion of a vanished whole, by accident it has broken away from its once existing body to become part of the alien world of the present. Thus, to Rong Rong, his rediscovery of the forgotten bed meant the resurrection of his childhood, with all its innocence. To reclaim the past, one must perform the past. So with his camera as his audience, he stripped, became an infant again, and lay in the empty bed.
PICTURE 5
RETURNING TO THE PRESENT

After two months in Fujian, Rong Rong rejoined Beijing's avant-garde scene. Ma Liuming and Zhu Ming had been released from jail. Members of the former East Village group, now scattered throughout the city, began to envision new collaborative projects. A significant change was that Rong Rong no longer remained invisible behind the camera: unknowingly, his solitary performance in Fujian had made him a self-conscious performer. In Premedical Sounds, a project carried out by more than ten artists in January 1995, Rong Rong appeared as a mock photojournalist. He was secretive about whether his camera was actually loaded, and the clicks of the shutter release did not automatically signify picture taking. The implication was that when the photographer became a performer, the camera became a prop in the performance.

Rong Rong took the photograph reproduced here during another performance, conducted by the Beijing-based artist Cang Xin in November 1994. For this performance, Cang made a thousand plaster casts of his own face. Each mask bore a white paper strip on the forehead, on which Cang wrote the year, month, day, hour, and minutes of the cast's manufacturing. He then lay the masks on the ground to fill the entire courtyard of his house, and also hung some masks on the walls as witnesses of the forthcoming events. During the performance, guests were invited to walk on the masks to destroy them, till all these artificial faces (of Cang Xin himself) were turned to shards.

Rong Rong's photograph records both this destructive process and his active participation. Numerous masks, many of them destroyed, lie on the ground behind the dominant figure. The figure holds up a mask to cover his face. The written date identifies the time of its production (2:21-26 p.m., November 26, 1994), but the mask is half broken, with the left eye and a portion of the forehead missing. The figure behind the mask is not the performance artist Cang Xin but the photographer Rong Rong, recognizable from his shoulder-length hair and delicate hand. So in taking this picture, Rong Rong assumed three roles at once: he designed and took the photograph, he conducted a "performance within a performance" as the subject of photographing; and this "performance within a performance" complicated the original project, subjecting the photographer himself to the simulated destruction.
PICTURE 6
RUIN ARCHITECTURE

Among the many contemporary Chinese artists fascinated by the transformation of the city, Rong Rong, in his photos of demolished traditional houses, best captures the anxiety and silence adrift in these modern ruins. Such sensitivity to ruins also best attests to his contemporaneity: to artists of his generation—who emerged in the early to mid-1990s—the 1960s and 1970s had become history, and they were finally able to bid farewell to the Cultural Revolution and its visual and mental baggage. Rong Rong’s pictures of ruined houses respond to China’s current transformation, not to history and collective memory. The transformation of the Chinese city is both the context and the content of these photographs. The image reproduced here, one of the earliest of Rong Rong’s works on this theme, shows a surviving wall seen from the inside of a nonexistent room. Its exposed wooden skeleton (which curiously resembles a Christian cross) is accentuated by dilapidated commercial portraits. Looking at these portraits closely, one recognizes Marilyn Monroe and some well-known Hong Kong movie stars. A more careful observer would also notice the various degrees of damage the images have suffered, as well as traces of absence: the thumbtacks on the wall indicate the former existence of other images, which are now gone.

This photo exemplifies three main characteristics of Rong Rong’s ruin images: the absence of a human subject, the lack of an apparent political or ideological agenda, and a skewed temporality and spatiality. While such representations of architectural ruins must testify to an attraction to shock and wound, it is by no means clear what is actually wounded besides the buildings themselves. The absence of a human subject is heightened by the surviving pinup images, which are too superficial to help us recognize any individuality; this is probably exactly why they were left behind. As a consequence, these photographs do not register a specific past, nor do they point to a perceivable future. What they represent, instead, is a brutal breakdown between private and public spaces. Ruins in these photographs are places that belong to everyone and to no one. They belong to no one because the breakdown between private and public spaces does not generate a new kind of space with a specific function. The subject of these photographs is therefore a “non-space” outside normal life.
In a May 1998 interview, Rong Rong told me about a memory from his childhood:

I remember I was in love with a picture in a calendar. That was a portrait of [the Taiwanese popular singer] Deng Lijun. I was small, not yet ten years old. Her songs were forbidden at that time. People told me that her songs were obscene (huangse). This calendar was given to my father by one of his friends from the South. It was hung upstairs, in our shared bedroom. As a boy, I was rather timid and was often scared when sleeping alone. But I felt safe when I saw the portrait. Everyone said she was beautiful, and I also thought so. Her eyes followed me around, and to me she was actually living. I often asked myself why her songs were forbidden. Later, such feelings came back to me when I saw the torn pictures on those broken walls.

This personal experience helps explain a contradiction in Rong Rong’s photographs that has puzzled me: on the one hand, his pictures of demolished residences document a relentless invasion of private spaces; on the other, they convey little feeling of calamity. Although these photos never feature human subjects, Rong Rong fills the vacancy with images—posters of glamorous stars like those hung in his childhood bedroom. Torn, and even missing large portions of the composition, these posters still exercise an alluring power over the spectator. They compensate for the missing human subject in these photographs, because the photographer, in his fetishistic imagination, substitutes himself for the posters’ original owner.

But this imagination must be threatened by external violence (symbolized by the very act of demolition). When such external destructive forces prevail, the fetishistic longing turns into mourning. In 1998, Rong Rong experienced one such defeat: on a photographic trip into an abandoned house, he found a discolored envelope half buried among broken bricks and tiles. Inside the envelope were film negatives cut into tiny pieces. The owner of the house apparently destroyed the negatives before leaving the place. Judging from the deterioration of the film, the envelope must have been there for months, or even years. The surviving fragments, as Rong Rong found out later, show portions of a young woman posing nude in a poorly decorated room—probably the very room where the negatives were destroyed and found.

It was not until two years later that Rong Rong made prints from these cut-up negatives. During those two years, he was haunted by the seemingly dismembered female body preserved in the envelope. He also debated with himself whether he should make prints from these found negatives and treat them as his own work. But as time passed by and the negatives stayed longer in his possession, a kind of intimacy grew between him and the anonymous girl: having rescued her from total destruction, he feels that he was probably entitled to bring her back to life again—even though just in bits and pieces—through artistic circulation.
PICTURE 8
META-PHOTOGRAPH

In a more profound sense, the prints Rong Rong made from the severed negatives have nothing to do with the girl or himself, but are about the materiality—especially the fragility and vulnerability—of photographs. In this sense, these prints can be called "meta-photographs." Paraphrasing what T. W. J. Mitchell has said, in his book *Picture Theory*, about *metapictures*, the purpose of a meta-photograph is to explain what photographs are—"to stage, as it were, the 'self-knowledge' of pictures."

In retrospect, we realize that almost all Rong Rong's photographs, even the relatively conventional ones, consistently make printed images their focus and point of reference. This interest becomes explicit in a number of miniseries, each consisting of two photographs of the same scene but taken at different distances: the first composition (e.g., Picture 6 in this essay) shows a larger architectural setting, while the second composition is a close-up of some printed material in this setting. The perceptual change from the former to the latter represents a conceptual shift from architecture to image, context to content, and photo to photo-within-photo.

"To explain what photographs are" is also the purpose of another group of photographs by Rong Rong. A study of the mortality of public photographs in Beijing, works in this group document the dying process of commercial and propaganda photographs displayed in various public spaces—on the street, in parks, and in exhibition windows. Faded and discolored, these are ruins of the former selves of exemplary photographs. "Photos are such vulnerable things"—Rong Rong murmured while looking at these photos with me in 1998. It is unclear whether he was commenting on his own photos or on the ruined images in them.
PICTURE 9
WEDDING GOWN

Rong Rong created three groups of photographs from 1997 to 2000 that feature the recurrent image of a white, Western-style wedding gown. In this picture, selected from the earliest series, a barely visible young man—Rong Rong himself—is embracing a young woman dressed in this gown. Tightly locked in each other's arms, the couple stand at a corner inside a ruined house. Next to them, and at the exact center of the composition, is a large, windowless opening through which one sees dead branches and crumbling buildings. Images within this internal frame are crisp but pointless, guiding the spectator back to the interior view.

The contrast between the shining satin gown and the debris-filled room, the suggestion of a secret romance in a haunted house, and what seems like a voyeuristic gaze into a discarded space all seem to suggest that the image is straight out of a melodramatic movie. But the picture nevertheless escapes parody, for there is raw emotion that animates the scene, refilling clichés with their lost meaning. Rong Rong told me that the girl was his lover at the time. She was from Japan, and they lived together for two years. The scene had nothing to do with any emotional disturbance in their relationship. It was just a performance.

But why the wedding gown and the ruined house? To the question I asked during an interview in July 2001, Rong Rong did not give a direct answer, but only offered some fragmentary sources of inspiration:

You know that before moving into the East Village I worked in commercial photo studios as a temporary worker. There was this craze of taking wedding pictures—a fashion probably coming from Japan via Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Everyone—not just newlyweds, but also older couples—wanted to have wedding pictures taken. The photos were quite expensive. To take a whole set was a full-day ordeal: the couple had to spend hours and hours changing dresses and putting on makeup, transforming themselves into fake movie stars or silly traditional drama characters. Of all the costumes, I only liked the white wedding gown, which never failed to make an ordinary girl look pretty and pure.

As for the ruined house, I really cannot say what made me choose it to stage my "wedding gown" pictures. Probably I was just intrigued by transporting the scene from a photo studio to somewhere radically different. It is ironic that the studio seems realer because it is part of the city and people's lives. You know I am always attracted by ruins. I cannot bring myself to pass a half-destroyed house without entering it. I feel that I can always find something—no matter what—inside.

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PICTURE 10
PERFORMING DEATH

This is the last photograph of the three "wedding gown" series. The second and third series become increasingly narrative and cartoonlike. Both series were shot at a site in the Western Hills, some forty miles from downtown Beijing. Local people call the place a "ghost village." It is said that the whole village was burned down during the Sino-Japanese war by Japanese troops, who finally took the place after much local resistance. Today, no one lives there. Some broken walls and gateways still stand amid dead trees with grotesque branches stretching into the sky.

The satin wedding gown is again the central prop of both series, and both series end with the burning of the gown. In the first series, the wedding gown, unused, hangs on a ruined wall. Rong Rong is the only figure in the pictures. Naked, he emerges from behind the wall, watching a fire gradually envelop the gown and finally turn it into ashes. In the last series, Rong Rong is accompanied by two girls dressed in similar wedding gowns. The first of the four pictures in the series shows Rong Rong, again naked, holding hands with one girl while both face a ruined house in silent contemplation; the other girl lies behind them on the ground, in a faint, or dead. In the second picture, Rong Rong has joined the girl on the ground; the other girl stands alone staring at the ruined house. This girl vanishes from the third composition; Rong Rong now moves to the edge of the ruined house and looks at the mountain gorge beyond. The final picture—the one reproduced here—represents a cremation scene. A raging fire is swallowing the girl (or her wedding gown) on the ground. Blurred by flames and smoke, Rong Rong is moving toward her (or her burning wedding gown) with open arms.

It is perhaps counterproductive to spell out the allegory or symbolism of these visual narratives. The only thing I can say—and I assume that it is obvious to any viewer—is that these photos perform death, and that it is therefore apt for Rong Rong to stage the performance in a "ghost village." ✳

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