

Real Mirage, Yao Jui-Chung's Statement of Democracy

Michael Wu

Property is theft

Featured in *Mirage III: Disused public property in Taiwan* is an essay written by artist and critic Kao Jun-Honn titled "La propriété, c'est le vol!" (Property is theft!) ^[1]. How appropriate this 19th century slogan which originally used by the self-described anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, can still in this day be used flawlessly to describe the current situation of the 21st century, a generally recognized democratic society of Taiwan. At time of writing Proudhon refers to property as the ownership of land property, and the right of the landowner to do as he pleases with his land. In today's society "property is theft" holds true in the sense of "public owned property is theft" in situations when the property is not utilized and left to ruin, as we can clearly see in Yao Jui-Chung's works.

A researcher, critic, curator and a prolific artist, Yao Jui-Chung has been constantly observing the environment, always concerning with the society, studiously documenting as much as possible. Fascinated by the ruins of Taiwan, since his college days in the 90's, Yao has roamed the ruins around Taiwan, the ruins and derelict building photographic works are one of his longest running series of works. From the Ta-Da-Na Experimental Group period where they first performed *Hamlet Machine* by the German postmodern playwright Heiner Müller in the remains of Shuinandong smelter & mineral processing plant, in Ruifang, in the outskirts of Taipei; to the most recent three volumes of the *Mirage: Disused Public Property in Taiwan* released between 2010 and 2013; with the forth edition in preparation, we

see Yao constantly return to these empty spaces deserted by man, it is clear these derelict sites provide an obvious attraction for Yao.

Examining through the comprehensive collection of ruins documented by Yao over the years, it feels like we can see the ghost and lingering memories of a lost society, perhaps that is why Yao named his temporary organization "Lost Society Document" (LSD). LSD is made up from Yao and his students; together they collaborated in the *Mirage* project; traveling to every corner of Taiwan documenting and researching mosquito pavilions (disused spaces which is inhabited by nothing else apart from mosquitos) focusing specifically on the public properties built from tax payer's money.

When the first volume was released back in 2010, medias in Taiwan was presented with something rather unique. Everyone knows ruins always existed, sometimes as a old vacant house by the side of the road where we commute everyday to work, sometimes as the primary school we once attended as a child, or an old abandoned military base that always seemed to scary to linger. These are ruins with memories, with signs of human activities left behind. Nevertheless much of the ruins presented in the three volumes of *Mirage: Disused Public Property in Taiwan*, was structures constructed to be ruins. They are the tangible demonstrations of "property is theft", where their existence itself is a violation of the benefit and will of the majority. This allows the medias as well as the opposing party an obvious target for questioning the actions of the current government. It is hard to tell when did the term "Mosquito Pavilion" became the commonly accepted description for disused public property, from the repeat exposures through media, gradually we grew accustomed to the use of this satirical term as a method of expression to describe the actions from the Taiwanese government, a way of venting our anger and powerlessness toward the government's oversized spending for buildings and structures unnecessary to the local man-in-the-fields.

Personally I still remember 4 years ago at the 2010 Taipei Biennale glancing through the first volume of *Mirage* and immediately discovering the aesthetic qualities of the

vacant spaces presented by these black and white images. Photographs featured within these books are selected for their factual representation. However they also develop on the aesthetic and critical thinking of Yao's previous works, reflecting on the beauty and potentials of the desolated parts of the environment and the intimacy within these purposeless spaces. But soon one will recognize the price of construction written to the side of each publicly constructed derelict site, often in units so large they are rarely seen in the context of daily life; a symbolic large number, signifying the great amount of tax money required to occupy spaces that need not to be occupied. These numbers, although distant and uncomprehending to most people, are all collected from the most average population. Hence today, we see the anarchic term "property is theft" relevant again in the now democratic society, in Yao's *Mirage* project and in the process of democracy overthrowing itself.

Mirage on the horizon of Democracy

Together with his organization—Lost Society Documents, through photography, they continue to bring the viewers to those ruins they have roamed. A reflection of the way Yao brings his students out of the art university, into the disused public spaces, taking the students back to their hometown and pushing them to redefine the borders of contemporary art, challenging their awareness of their surroundings, collecting data and information, studying and organizing into logical hierarchy, ranging from completely disused, partially disused to reutilized properties, becoming topographers instead of artists. With the *Mirage* project Yao and LSD are challenging the boundaries between contemporary art, social movement and democracy. Intervene through actions, retrieving the reality of the derelict buildings and exposing them in front of all viewers. By involving his students Yao has introduced *Mirage* as an intervention of everyday life, the students return back to their home town and search for mosquito pavilions, sometimes together with their parents. These students most of whom are not professionally trained photographers contributed to the awareness of the project. It is by this involvement that results to the removal of

the romantic roaming we see so often in Yao's previous works, also makes these uncomprehendingly expensive, distant and forgotten spaces accessible to everyone.

Critic Huang Chien Hung in his essay titled "Reimbursement of memory and memory scavengers" ^[2] featured in *Mirage II: Disused Public Property in Taiwan* describes Yao's *Mirage* project and his earlier works as a comparison between art movements in particular, "romanticism and realism"; and concludes where *Mirage* project is a series of work that ponders between romanticism and realism. While previously in Yao's photography we see him pursuing an absolute truth in the ruins, as these ruins that existed in the past will still be real in the future. Within those works we can clearly see the aesthetics in decadence, in the passage of time, in Taiwan as the self-developing ruin in progression and in the years Yao spent during his college days searching for his uncompromising world through creation of art within those ruins. Within those images are the relationships between the photographer and the subject; images become the carrier of statements declaring the eventual collapse of the world. But for the more recent *Mirage* series, images are juxtaposed with texts, and the volume of Yao's declaration turned down, we no longer sense one man's endless pursuit, wandering, and self-exile, but instead replaced with a discrete and factual statement of the ruins Yao and his student visited. This involvement of student brought these images to a position where society and the masses can relate to, overlooking the romantics of the space. These are the ruins of the contemporary, where the permanency of the ruins was no longer determined by the actions of the artist, but instead altered by it. This change of space and time is clear in the *Mirage* series, using a statistical and narrative styled text, the photographs of *Mirage* is firmly set in the present for the viewers of the present day where we are in a democratic society and surrounded by various form of media, removing the poetics to place it firmly in the context of an authoritarian system ruled by the few who stand to receive profits. If the *Mirage* project is to succeed, the only place for these ruins to exist will be within the project, by documenting these ruins Yao is effectively announcing the end of the site.

At the start of the *Mirage* project Yao began by visiting and conducting field studies, to bring the location for practicing art, into deserted spaces, but in the end returning to the white cube for the display of his results as narrative documentations, taking these ruins into a space contradictory to its original location, challenging the way we perceive derelict buildings. We step into an exhibition space to see images of the outside world, displayed splendidly on the wall. Contrary to "Mirage" in its title nothing can be truer than images displayed on immaculate, solid, clean white walls. Nevertheless "Mirage" is a fitting term for the failure of democratic government, where politicians has presented us with many wonderful possibilities in the not so distant horizon, so close we could almost reach it. But it is after reaching out, we then realize what we saw are nothing but empty illusions. In a democratic society, and one where the population are particularly engaged with politics, every election presents new challenges for the candidates, everyone ranging from businessman, professors, and celebrities to organized crime syndicate members all wish to become politicians. We see local head of villages applying for funding from the central government to widen or build new roads, and mayors building large multistory farm produce trade markets, all in an attempt to convince the electorate they provide the best future for the local economy, and as the means to this end, spending large amount of electorate's money during the process. We could look at this as the side effect of election where after the drama of voting passes, and people's focus shifted to the next chapter, local governments are left with buildings, technology parks, trade markets with little knowledge or ability to maintain. Of course these fallen buildings wasn't intended to be constructed as ruins, all are constructed with the greatest intension in mind, but when we reach the site of this fantastic mirage, the only reality remaining are structures that lack local cultural understandings, lack specialized knowledge, lack management and maintenance skills making them destined to remain as a Mirage in the distant.

In an ideal world, democracy should be able to allow a free market capitalist society, however capitalism's inherent nature is destined to create overwhelming forces that

threaten democratic societies. If we look at the social construct of counties within Taiwan, industries like the construction industry, bank and building societies, farmers associations, are all connected to local dignitaries and politician, together forming an intricate food chain. These large-scale purpose build fish harbors, industrial estates, local culture centers, community centers, parking lots and parks are all the product of the battle for dominance between the different political forces and our current electoral mechanism. The cause often originates from the central and local government wishing to create visible tangible achievements, to make up for promises made during the elections, but because of half-minded policy, incomplete planning and unrealistically optimistic future projections allowing budget in constructing large scale development projects to pass, in the end these are projects that doesn't live up to their expected usage rates due to one cause or another, meaning the unavoidable fate of projects becoming ruins. But the huge profits from construction, and the monument like visible achievement for the politicians, masks this shortsightedness and superficial thoughts of the authorities.

Stepping into the desolated ruins

Walking into the colorless exhibition space of *Mirage:Disused Public Property in Taiwan*, viewers confront the wall of photographs elegantly framed and arranged in a clinically precise position almost as they are names of fallen war heroes engraved on a monument, fittingly so, as they are the expended fallen soldiers of the election war eternalized in the memorial hall in a museum exhibition. Similar to any war, we create soldiers and heroes, while those who lived stand to be the accomplishment of the government, those who have fallen are eventually forgotten as grass and weeds grow tall. Yao has arranged the images in a way where they are removed from their original environment similar to artifacts in natural history museums; viewers immediately sense an unmovable weight of these images and their content. Walking past each photograph, squinting their eyes at the names of the building, taking note of what they used to be before being immortalized on the wall, then they arrive

at the documentary video where we see participating students appearing in front of the camera inside the exhibition hall, talking about the ruins they have visited, photographed and written about. Seeing the students allow viewers to access and relate to the photography they see, contextualizing and reaffirming the reality of the buildings in the mirage.

"In the ocean outside of Yunlin sits a site that was originally planned to be filled up to be a rectangular island with an area of 1000 hectares, in the end spending tens of billion of dollar creating 300 hectares of new offshore styled industrial estate, intended for the oil industry. But after protests from the environmentalist, the company moved to the South East Asia. Stacks of money are just thrown into the ocean like those concrete blocks used to dispense waves, creating this uninhabited island just like a stranded aircraft carrier. Sand from construction covered the oyster farms nearby, greatly damaging the local ecology. Currently there is nothing on the island, government in attempt to revive the land, once held a kite competition on the island, all so very speech less." ^[3]—an interview Yao gave with *in out* magazine from china.

What Yao said was from an example featured in the second volume of *Mirage*, planning for this particular site started in 1990, in 1998 construction began, and in 2004 construction stopped. Just like *Laputa* in *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift, not on any official map released by the government, no one seemed to know the exact location and parameters to this enormous piece of land. Hsu Hsin-Yun, a student of Yao describes the journey to the site in the second volume of *Mirage*, "The only way to locate it was by the bridge leading to the odd rectangular shaped island visible on Google Map. Road closed, and barricaded off with security guards on patrol, but visitors can tell it is the correct location from the faded signs posts nearby." ^[4] If successfully planned, constructed and completed, it could be a great achievement. To the local economy it generate jobs prompting related services industry for the workers to develop; to the ruling government another achievement to add to their accomplishments in the election war game, and proving to the world the

ability of Taiwanese government; to the local dignitaries—and crime syndicate who control the construction sector giving them more payoffs, own favors and power; to the local residents, noise, pollution, health risks, and damage to the agriculture industry which many in Yunlin depend upon.

We see many examples such as the one mentioned, some possibly not as controversial, but they are obviously still public properties commissioned and not properly planned. Overall in Taiwan because of the uncertainty from the international political standpoint, we are a nation that suffers from identity issues; therefore all across the population seeking and obtaining international acceptance and recognition becomes the upmost patriotic notion. In 1999, as the highest administrative authority of Taiwan, the Executive Yuan set forth a metropolis project to assist local councils to ease the pressure caused by the increased number of vehicles, and started a "one town one multistory parking lot" project demonstrating the overall development and urbanization in our nation as a complete country. Since then we see a number of these towering buildings appear in towns and villages, awkward, uneasy and out of place,

"We comfort ourselves by reliving memories of protection. Something closed must retain our memories, while leaving them their original value as images. Memories of the outside world will never have the same tonality as those of home and, by recalling these memories, we add to our store of dreams" —Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* ^[5]

Space built without memories of the local land is not a space where man will be comforted. It is the great divide between the city and the village that cause these buildings to sit on the land as empty shells. The overly optimistic values and belief led our government to duplicating memories of space from one part of the country and imprinting them forcibly onto the space of another, wishing others will accept the lifestyle of the capital, attempting to convince local residents the qualities of life is increased proportionally to the perspective of urbanization. While these structures

become out of place; for people entering, it also meant entering an environment filled with memories unfamiliar to them. Not trusting the space one is in results in not wanting to be in the space, inconvenience and mistrust caused these market places, parking lots, community centers to become desolated, become a environment where memories does not yet exist and the people are not willing to create new ones. From Yao's previous works we see the evidence of a relationship between him and the spaces he visited, a memory created from his physical presence in the space. Yet, in the *Mirage* project, Yao did not personally take these photos, almost as if to distance him from these shells of structures.

Afterthoughts

Over the past we have seen many examples where artists have created works through intervention with society or social movement, many of which takes the form of performance art, for Yao it is the raising of public awareness and stating his belief in the aesthetics within a desolate setting and at the same time being a voice that is part of this democracy, validating his work as the intervention and holding the ground of political and democratic correctness. What we see from Yao's *Mirage* project is a temple and collection of the failures and byproducts of democracy, and together with LSD, this project serve as the monitoring system the government failed to establish for the interest of the population. How long will this intervention be effective, and to what depths, are still to be seen. But from Yao's prophesy like title for his 2006 solo exhibition in the Taipei Fine Art Museum, "Everything will fall into Ruins" possibly some just faster than others, including art, and including democracy, so maybe in the end on a certain level *Mirage* is also one man's romantic tribute to the ruins that attracted him since college days.

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- 1.Kao Jun-Honn, "Property is theft," in *Mirage III:Disused Public Property in Taiwan*, edited by Yao Jui-Chung and LSD, (Taipei:Garden City, 2013), pp. 18-23.
- 2.Huang Chien Hung, "Reimbursement of memory and memory scavengers," in *Mirage II:Disused Public Property in Taiwan*, edited by Yao Jui-Chung and LSD, (Taipei:Garden City, 2011), pp. 45-46.
- 3.Translated from the transcription of an interview Yao gave with *in out* magazine from China, provided by Yao Jui-Chung, also featured in essay by Wang Sheng-Hung, "After the shattered illusions of modernity, and excavation of video action" in *Mirage III:Disused Public Property in Taiwan*, edited by Yao Jui-Chung and LSD, (Taipei:Garden City, 2013), pp. 69.
- 4.Hsu Hsin-Yun, *Mirage II:Disused Public Property in Taiwan*, edited by Yao Jui-Chung and LSD, (Taipei:Garden City, 2011), pp. 128-129
- 5.Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, (Boston:Beacon Press, 1994), pp. 6.



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