

The Power of Action: Yao Jui-chung and the *Mirage – Disused Public Property in Taiwan*,

by Lu Pei-yi

Foreward

When the new semester began in February 2010, Yao Jui-chung, presiding over the first classes of the fine arts departments at Taipei National University of the Arts and the National Taiwan Normal University, asked the students about their expectations for this class: did they wish to follow the normal class format, where the teacher would teach related knowledge, or would they like to use the class to do a “mosquito hall” investigation? The fifty-some students at the two universities decided to make a Taiwan-wide “mosquito hall” survey as the assignment for this semester. Through half a year of investigation across the island, the students identified one hundred and forty seven “mosquito hall” locations, compiling the 684 page book *Mirage – Disused Public Property in Taiwan*, which outlines an absurd situation in Taiwanese society, embodying the fact that “misguided policy is worse than corruption.” Meanwhile, this artistic action took part in the 2010 Taipei Biennial Movement Project. It was widely reported in the media, and attracted a high level of attention from the government, even prompting a call from the Vice President and a visit from the Premier of the Executive Yuan, who advised all relevant departments to engage in an inspection of said facilities, ordering them to revive all mosquito halls within a year or consider demolishing them. Through six months of homework, the students’ art action was like a stone thrown into a pond, sending ripples outwards, shaking a presumably calm society and forcing them to face reality. Through interviews with Yao Jui-chung and participating students, this paper focuses on the following questions: What is the significance of this art project’s social participation? How does this project differ from a sociological survey or a special news report? Finally, it explores the power of participation. The author believes that the significance and value of “participation” in this project lie in the fact that it is both a collective action by Yao Jui-chung and his students, and in that it used artistic methods to hold up a social issue to scrutiny and engage the awareness of the people in regards to that issue.

The “Mosquito Hall” Survey

In the 1990s, with the rise of localism that followed the lifting of martial law and the push throughout society to create cultural policies, the construction of museums became a hot trend. Under the banner of promoting local uniqueness, various towns established regional museums as the embodiments of local uniqueness in practice. Meanwhile, following various master plans, government departments engaged in a building spree, as seen with the Transportation Ministry’s “one parking lot for every town,” the Environmental Protection Agency’s “one incinerator for every county,”

and the countless scenic fish markets and agricultural product centers built by the Council of Agriculture. Not to be outdone, the Ministry of the Interior erected a series of buildings in the name of social welfare or social recreation. After massive amounts of public money were spent to construct these facilities, they were not put into operation according to plan. It is not that they were built but never put into use; when facing a lack of budgetary support, they were poorly managed and received few visitors, becoming rarely used public buildings. They became known as “deserted buildings” or “idle spaces,” or, colloquially, “mosquito halls” – these empty spaces were good only for raising mosquitos and served no other useful function whatever.

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

Yao Jui-chung originally wanted to slowly figure out the story behind “mosquito halls” through his own inspection, but once he began, he realized that the more he looked, the more he found, the more pictures he took, the more houses there were. Also, the government was in the process of reviving some of the mosquito halls, and he hoped to document them before this revival. In this race against time, and in consideration of the scale of the project, Yao shifted his project from a personal battle to a collective effort, breaking up the investigation among participants. A joint effort involving fifty students from the fine arts departments of Taipei National University of the Arts and the National Taiwan Normal University, the half year project known as the *Lost Society Document* (LSD) was carried out from March to September 2010.

To begin, for the first six weeks of the semester, Yao Jui-chung taught the Normal University students the principles of photography and photography development techniques, while delivering six lectures on art and society at the Taipei National University of the Arts to enhance the students’ social awareness. After these basic classes, students split up to collect materials and to take photographs in the towns as part of the survey. Upon returning to class, the students brought their materials together for classroom reports and discussions. Upon on-the-scenes inspections and record-checking of over two hundred thirty suspected cases, one hundred nineteen buildings were verified as being idle or underutilized public facilities while twenty eight had already been removed from the auspices of the Public Construction Commission, Executive Yuan, i.e. officially “revived” facilities. The result, in the form of on-the-scenes reports and photographs, were compiled into the 684 page illustrated book *Mirage – Disused Public Property in Taiwan*.

The title *Mirage* clearly and incisively pointed out that the mosquito halls were merely exterior shells with no internal substance while implying that the government was misusing taxpayer money to construct these mirages which have no basis in reality. The original Chinese subtitle " *Sample Survey of Disused Public Property in*

Taiwan” explains the target and methods of this art project. The “*Disused Public Property in Taiwan*” are the target, while the word “Sample” states that the collected cases are merely the tip of the iceberg, and “Survey” explains the methodology: a kind of bodily experience gained from engaging in observation while present at the scene, using “the presence of the body as a viewpoint” to really and truly reveal these social realities that are all around us but often ignored.

Ruins/Photography/Present Bodies

Through a close reading of *Mirage – Disused Public Property in Taiwan*, one discovers the creative elements that mark all of Yao Jui-chung’s art. First, the “active declaration of the body’s presence” is a main thread that runs through the artist’s oeuvre. Beginning with his early environmental measurements, he has used bodily presence, as well as the body’s urination on the field (the *Territory Takeover* action), flight (the *Recover Mainland China* action, the *World is for All* action and the *Liberating Taiwan* action), or standing upside-down (*Chinatown – Dizzy*) to engage in measurement and to mark the body’s occupation of the realm in question. Critic and curator Amy Cheng calls Yao a “creator of roads.” Yao, who is always on the road, wants to do something that is “not merely satire, not merely witness; what he wants to say is not merely history or nihilism but to declare, under any and all circumstances, ‘I’m here, I’m here, I’m here,’”¹ presenting a sense of the real in the here and now.

Yao Jui-chung has been obsessed with the aesthetics of ruins since college. He says, “Sometimes in my wanderings, I often don’t know where, perhaps on a small country road, I will see some ruins, and I will be drawn to them. It is a very serendipitous process; I never set out to choose anything in particular.” These random wanderings in the ruins led him to use his camera to document those “manmade, untouched by man” places across the unknown corners of Taiwan, including abandoned residences, factories, warehouses, bunkers, amusement parks and holiday resorts, using black and white film to fix these scenes that have already been discarded by the times, these presences that have been forgotten by Taiwan’s modernization, and using travelogue-type notes to describe “how a boring life can be summoned by the ruins.”²

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

The Ruined Islands: Wandering the Ruins of Taiwan's Outlying Islands takes things a step further, using the lens to “see” the “products of a tragic age, those ruins that were intentionally forgotten.” Unlike the random wanderings and photography of the previous phase, in this phase, he focused on the military ruins and prison ruins created by the changing political environment along the Taiwan Strait. These black and white photographs of the ruins both reveal a hidden reality and preserve a fast-disappearing now. Aside from serving as real evidence of “presence,” they force the viewer to “see” not only the irreversible decline of these ruins, but also to make connections between these ruins and their surrounding sociopolitical circumstances, pushing the viewer to explore the wordless, helpless causes behind the creation of these ruins. Susan Sontag said that photography “inserts a person into a ‘certain connection with society.’”³ Photography, especially documentary photography accompanied by reportage, is the front line of art’s participation in society. When the power of the image is used to turn photography into a tool for participation in the changing of society, photography is no longer just a form of documentation; it becomes the photographer’s criticism of the world.

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

As a path towards positive engagement with the world, the “mosquito hall” represented a reversal of the artist’s self-exile. We can get a sense of this in the opening remarks for the *Roam Finale* exhibition, which he held in 1997 with several other artists at an abandoned textile factory in Shanjhih:

“If we say that resistance is a state of active engagement in the world, with hopes of changing something, then self-exile, or poetic wandering... points to a directionless direction, moving from below away from the grasp of the forces at the capitalist center, to be adrift in a mutual gaze with the enchanting images that roam through time and space.”⁴(emphasis added)

The late 80s and early 90s were a period of great social change following the lifting of martial law. Though the artist’s resistance was a state of positive engagement with the world, he often took on the massive system through individual effort alone, standing in opposition to the system, calling out and standing for the fall of the old system, holding out hope for change. The drifting, isolated, coolly observing state of self-exile is the other end of the spectrum, the desire to “use a mobile ‘margin’ to encircle an authoritative ‘center.’”⁵ Following his growing maturity and the shift in mental state that is entailed by starting a family, Yao

Jui-chung's artistic creation entered into a new phase. He says, "Having a child changed my entire life."⁶ When he thought about how his child would grow up in this society so full of problems, he began thinking about how he could promote change in this society. The "mosquito hall survey action" was his social practice in action, taking it further in a more strategic manner, using a massive survey to raise the issue to the fore, eliciting controversy and producing a real effect.

The Folk Methods and Critical Significance of the Mosquito hall Survey

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

"The work engaged in by Yao Jui-chung and *Lost Society Documents* is not like the headline 'exposés' or 'revelations' engaged in by reporters or people's representatives; it is more of an art of 'scavenging,' – an art of the perpetual recycling of ideas. What Yao Jui-chung unlike the public information read on the internet and the scattered exposés that appear in the media, Yao Jui-chung does not engage in an academic-style social survey or the use of fact-based methods to explore social relationships; instead he engages in Google searches, asks locals and passersby, inquires with local opposition parties, looks up media reports (the media viewpoint), redress papers from the Control Yuan (the internal government oversight viewpoint), and compiles the above materials, and through the teaching, learning and practice of these methods between the artist and his students, they take these memory fragments from the past decade or so around the cities and towns of Taiwan, and engage in the 'gathering' and 'stitching' of these 'unsubsidized' and 'unfunded' everyday folk methods.'⁷ (Emphasis added)

The above description clearly delineates the differences between this artistic action and rigorous sociological investigations or special reports written from the media's perspective. Sociological investigations emphasize the precise data, complete sampling methods and effective questionnaires of quantified research, or the rigorously defined focus groups, in-depth interviews, participatory observations and ethnographic field surveys of quantitative research, using scientific evidence to test a set hypothesis. News media reports mainly rely on interviews of involved parties or the explanations of related persons and tend to follow a thread of media exposure. The mosquito hall survey of Yao Jui-chung and his students, on the other hand, aside from the precision of basic data, places more emphasis on the experience of bodily presence, using the method of "presence as a viewpoint," using the camera to "see" the true face of the ruins on behalf of the readers and using travelogue-style writings to lead the readers into the corners of these mosquito halls. As Yao Jui-chung said, the power of this artistic action lies in the good aesthetic training of the participants, their

keen insights, soft souls and perceptive writing; this is precisely where the project differs from sociological research or news reportage. Overall, the “mosquito hall survey action” reveals social, political and economic issues with an aesthetic eye, and this is what makes artistic actions unique.

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

“The ‘mosquito halls’ listed in this book are mainly public facilities constructed at great expense by government departments in the past twenty years. The reasons behind their formation are complex; some of the reasons include politicians writing campaign checks, the central and regional governments engaging in inappropriate and overly ambitious policy decisions, gunning for world records, overly optimistic utilization predictions, planning and design that is not in keeping with the needs of the people, facilities placed in inconvenient locations and insufficient funds for follow-through and maintenance, which leads to underutilization or utter idleness. Such ‘idle public facilities,’ built for political reasons, elections, the expansion of internal demand or attempts to bridge the urban-rural gap, are found across the country, and the problem has yet to subside.”⁸ (Emphasis added)

What Yao Jui-chung and his students set out to do was to establish a case file: to present these concealed or forgotten mosquito halls on the greatest scale possible over a short period of time, using the black and white output of mystical tension that is student photos from the scenes to present irrefutable evidence of government malfeasance. For instance, one passage discusses the construction of the Deep Sea Fishing Harbor in Jiading Township, Kaoshiung. The Hsing-ta Fishing Harbor was built in 1988 to alleviate the traffic overload of deep sea fishing vessels at Cianjhen. The new harbor occupied 380 hectares, and was lauded as the largest deep sea fishing wharf in Southeast Asia, but in recent years it has been hit by a contraction in the fishing industry, along with faulty government assessments of demand. Officials “declared” that a downturn in the fishing industry led to underutilization of the Hsing-ta Harbor and left it idle. It has recently shifted its direction towards short-range fishing vessels and tourism, with officials further investing for the “Kaoshiung Hsing-ta Harbor Recreation Beautification Project.” Their investigation of the resulting Lover’s Harbor, Seafood Market and Seaside Theatre concluded that the facilities were in neglect, visitors were few and the space was generally idle.⁹ Another example is the Hai’an Road Underground Market in Tainan, which was first conceived to alleviate a parking shortage in the commercial district and revitalize the area but now, twenty years later, has yet to be completed and put to use, becoming a blight on the city of Tainan. The case of Hai’an Road includes faulty assessments, bankrupt vendors and government corruption. Even after three short term art interventions to beautify the street, the underground market project remains

indefinitely postponed. Many cases affirm the fact that “misguided policy is worse than corruption,” while reinvestments aimed at revitalization often fail, leaving many of these mosquito halls in a never-ending cycle of construction – idleness – revitalization – failure – re-revitalization – failure – idleness.

The reason that the “mosquito hall survey action” was able to directly shake things up on the political level is that Yao Jui-chung, born of a politician family, possesses a degree of political sensitivity. Yao knew that he had to publish this book before an election to have a chance of eliciting a response from political figures, and he knew how to find the appropriate moment to place it at the steps of the halls of government. He understood the dimensions of that grey line, and he knew even more where the power of art lies: “Art provides the viewer with space to imagine, to interpret, to ponder; every individual has the potential to engage in a dialogue with society.” This is another reason behind the success of this action – “art” provided Yao Jui-chung with the identity of an artist, and this “anti-political” armor allowed him to intervene in this complex political issue from the perspective of the artist. Likewise, this project’s inclusion in the 2010 Taipei Biennial Movement Program¹⁰ provided the outside world with the visage of acceptance by the art world. Furthermore, Yao’s identity as a university professor and the collective artistic action of the students affirmed a sense of neutrality, which is one of the reasons that this survey action gained the trust of society. On the other hand, the “mosquito hall survey action” also challenged and attacked the educational system, including the conservatism of teaching, the separation of education from society and the university’s role to prepare students for society. Meanwhile, as a famous educational institution for producing educators, “Normal University” provided this artistic action with a stage from which Yao Jui-chung could walk the fine line of criticizing the system from within the system.

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

“At first I was quite worried about whether or not these children of the so called ‘strawberry generation’ (children born in the 1980s) would be able to complete such a massive survey, but as the reports rolled in, I gradually gained a sense of the romantic sentiments buried in the hearts of these youths. The romanticism of which I speak is not in terms of romantic love but the desire for reform that is stirred by the social reality. It includes a kind of innocent sentiment that has yet to be wiped out by society, a sentiment that represents the possibility for tiny shrimp to band together and take on a giant whale.”¹¹ (Emphasis added)

As these inexperienced students without a deep social awareness gradually gained a sense, through the process of the survey, of the absurdity and unfairness of their society, their perplexity gave rise to a new social awareness. For instance, Normal University student Wang Yueh-Hsin and Art University student Kuo Pin-Chun at first merely felt an aesthetic sentimentalism towards the ruins, but their participation in this project broadened their perspective on society.¹² Aside from visiting the mosquito halls in person, this trip to the countryside was also an exploration of the self; Art University student Hu Ziqi feels that the process of returning home for the survey struck his understanding of himself and his hometown. The ethnic Bunun student came to feel that “Aboriginal culture cannot be represented by artifacts on display. Those soulless objects are absolutely incapable of expressing the spirit of the aboriginal peoples and their gracious, joyful hearts.”¹³

Moreover, the students who travelled the ruins gained different experiences. In the documentary, Art University student Ke Junyao says that “interacting with the ruins is like a kind of therapy,” and that “in making art you must excavate yourself... in a state of solitude you can say much to yourself.” Or perhaps you will come to feel that you are an intruder, and ask yourself, “In what kind of mental state should I approach these halted ruins?”¹⁴ The ruins also provided the students with artistic inspiration. Upon entering the abandoned Kinmen Culture Park, Art University student Wu Ping-Sheng unexpectedly stumbled across the “sounds” of the ruins: “the sounds of bird calls within the empty buildings.” He said, “I felt that there was a massive, empty space within the building, as if I were in a massive birdcage.”¹⁵ He recorded the “sounds” of the ruins and added a random noise as a response, creating an artwork.

Though the student voices in *Mirage – Disused Public Property in Taiwan* appear young and naïve, and this art project was focused on a survey of the mosquito halls across Taiwan, using photography and writing to reveal reality and criticize government actions, the shared participation and experience of the students is another point of value in this artistic action. In interviews, Yao Jui-chung says that the possible results of this action would be changes to the self, adjustment of aesthetic views, improvement of interpersonal relations, the production of value and the promotion of change in the social situation.¹⁶ Looking at the “mosquito hall survey action,” we can already see all of these effects presenting themselves. Through the students’ participation in this artistic activity (individual participation) and the shifts in their concepts and fields of vision, their relationship with society shifts closer to reality (participation in society). This artistic action can use artistic methods to raise real social issues, raising people’s consciousness for discussion (the citizen’s participation in society).

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

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¹ Amy Cheng, “Zai Lushang – Yao Jui-chong Chuangzuo de Shi Nian” (“On the Road – Ten Years of Yao Jui-chung’s Artistic Creation”), *Xiandai Meishu (Modern Art Magazine)*, (2006-10), p. 47.

² Yao Jui-chung, *Taiwan Feixu Mizou (Roam the Ruins of Taiwan)*, Preface.

³ Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, as translated by Huang Handi, Taipei: Tonsan Publications, 1997, p. 2.

⁴ Yu Wei, “Ren Zai Feixu – Yao Jui-chung” (“Man Among the Ruins”), *Artco Monthly*, (2006-10), p 270; excerpted from Yao Jui-chung, “Moshu Manyou” (“Roam Finale”), *Artist Magazine*, (1997-04), p. 524.

⁵ Yu Wei, See note 4, p. 269.

⁶ Interview with Yao Jui-chung, 3:30-5:30pm, January 4, 2011 at the Taipei National University of the Arts Coffee House.

⁷ Huang Chien-Hung, “Baoxiao de Jiyi yu Jiyi de Shihuang” (“Expensed Memories and the Scavenging of Memory”), *Artco Monthly*, (2010-10), p. 111.

⁸ Yao Jui-chung, *Editor’s Remarks*, published in *Haishi Shenlou – Taiwan Xianzhi Gonggong Sheshi Chouyang Tacha (Mirage – Disused Public Property in Taiwan)*, Yao Jui-chung and LSD, eds., Taipei: Garden City Publishing Co., 2010, pp. 8-9.

⁹ Huang Hsi-Chen, “Hsing-ta Harbor, Jiading Township, Kaoshiung”, published in *Mirage*, Yao Jui-chung and LSD, eds., Taipei: Garden City Publishing Co., 2010, pp. 40-57.

¹⁰ The planned presentation method for the Taipei Biennial, however, was quite conservative; it was presented as part of the artwork entitled *Google Office*.

¹¹ Yao Jui-chung, See note 8, p. 9.

¹² Interview with Wang Yueh-Hsin, Minami Coffee House, January 20, 2011, 2:00-4:00 pm.

Interview with Kuo Pin-Chun, National Taipei University for the Arts Computer Lab, January 21, 2011, 2:00-3:30 pm.

Interview with Hu Zi-Chi, National Taipei University for the Arts Computer Lab, January 21, 2011, 2:00-3:30 pm.

¹³ Hu Zi-Chi, “Bunun Cultural Relics Museum”, published in *Mirage*, p. 211.

¹⁴ Sandy Lo, *Mirage Documentary*, 2010. (see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F_zAmzjv734)

¹⁵ See note 9.

¹⁶ See note 6.