

IN CONVERSATION: YAO JUI-CHUNG WITH TIMOTHY MURRAY

It might seem paradoxical to engage in a conversation about networked culture and unsitely aesthetics with an artist whose practice remains deeply ambivalent about the culture of the internet itself. But in speaking with Maria Miranda about the scope of this collection on uncertain practices and unsitely aesthetics, I couldn't think of an artist whose practice embodies her overall aesthetic concept better than does that of the Taiwanese artist, Yao Jui-Chung. While standing forth as a strong proponent of the development of new media art in Taiwan, his work places more emphasis on the gritty politics of historical networks than on any utopian promise of the internet itself. As will become apparent in our discussion, the power of knowledge takes precedence for Yao over the play of the internet. Yet, his practice as a conceptual photographer and political installation artist capitalizes and reflects on the mobile, nomadic, and performative nature of an artistic engagement that has left the safe confines of the studio for the communal spaces of an ontology of cultural resistance. Taiwan's enthusiastic embrace of new media and networked identities is grounded in and conflated with the complex histories of its colonized past and the fraught tensions of its Asian presence. For a Taiwanese artist, then, unsiteliness is less a condition of virtual orientation than a reality of geopolitical bifurcation, being of and out of China, while bearing the socioeconomic traces of its colonial lords, whether under the yoke of pre-technological Japan or snared in the web of the less than subtle economic colonizer, the USA. To a certain degree, Yao's artistic practice, which we will discuss below, exemplifies the paradoxical place of the internet within Asian circles of new media art. The internet as a novel medium of artistic practice has had much less of a stronghold across Asia than it has tended to have in the West. I found when curating internet art in the late 1990s and early 2000s, for example, that the exciting genre of net.art had a vastly smaller footprint throughout Asia than across Australia, Europe, and North America. Is it a coincidence that Shu Lea Cheang of Taiwanese heritage and Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries of Korea were the only artists who submitted net.art for the many issues of CTHEORY MULTIMEDIA that I curated with Arthur and Marilouise Kroker? → Similarly in 2000, I curated a net.art exhibition in Slovenia with Teo Spiller for which we managed to exhibit only one Asian artist, Thuan Duc Tran of Vietnam, out of some thirty-five international artists. → That these were two of the earlier international platforms curated primarily via emergent listservs such as

YAO JUI-CHUNG was born in 1969 in Taipei. He graduated from The National Institute of The Arts (Taipei National University of the Arts) with a degree in Art Theory. In 1997, he represented Taiwan in *Facing Faces – Taiwan* at the Venice Biennale and took part in the International Triennale of Contemporary Art Yokohama in 2005, APT6 (2009) and Taipei biennial (2010). Apart from working in the fields of theatre and film, he has taught art history, written art criticisms and curated exhibitions. The themes of his works are varied, but most importantly they examine the absurdity of the human condition. Apart from creating art, his essays have been published in many art journals. He has also published several books, including *Installation Art in Taiwan since 1991–2001* (2002), *The New Wave of Contemporary Taiwan Photography Since 1999* (2003), *Roam The Ruins of Taiwan* (2004), *Performance Art in Taiwan 1978–2004* (2005), *A Walk in the Contemporary Art: Roaming the Rebellious Streets* (2005), *Ruined Islands* (2007), *Yao Jui-Chung* (2008), *Beyond Humanity* (2008), *Nebulous Light* (2009), and *Biennial-Hop* (2010). His works have been collected by museums and many private collectors. He teaches at the Taipei National University of the Arts and the National Taiwan Normal University Department of Fine Arts.
See: <http://www.yaojuichung.com/>

TIMOTHY MURRAY Director of the Society for the Humanities, Curator of the Rose Goldsen Archive of New Media Art, and Professor of Comparative Literature and English at Cornell University. He is Co-Moderator of -empyre- soft-skinned space, the new media listserv and the author of *Digital Baroque: New Media Art and Cinematic Folds* (Minnesota 2008); *Zonas de Contacto: El Arte en CD-ROM* (Centro de la imagen, 1999); *Drama Trauma: Specters of Race and Sexuality in Performance, Video, Art* (Routledge, 1997); *Like a Film: Ideological Fantasy on Screen, Camera, and Canvas* (Routledge, 1993); *Theatrical Legitimation: Allegories of Genius in XVIIth-Century England and France* (Oxford, 1987). He is editor of *Mimesis, Masochism & Mime: The Politics of Theatricality in Contemporary French Thought* (Michigan, 1997) and, with Alan Smith, *Repossessions: Psychoanalysis and the Phantasms of Early-Modern Culture* (Minnesota, 1997). His curatorial projects include Ctheory Multimedia and *Contact Zones: The Art of the CD-Rom*.
See: <http://goldsen.library.cornell.edu/>
See: <http://empyre.library.cornell.edu/>
See: <https://contactzones.cit.cornell.edu/>

→ CTHEORY MULTIMEDIA

See: <http://ctheorymultimedia.cornell.edu/>

→ Timothy Murray and Teo Spiller, curators, *Off-line Net Art, INFOS 2000*; Ljubljana, Slovenia.

See: <http://goldsen.library.cornell.edu/internet/infos.php>

Rhizome could well suggest the ongoing balkanization of Asian artists and curators from Western discussions on the web. This could be attributed not only to fundamental cultural differences but also, if not primarily, to coding differences that isolated Asian languages from the English dominated web.

Yet, my discussion with Yao will point to something of an even broader cultural indifference to networked art. This first became apparent to me in the late 1990s when I curated the exhibition, → *Contact Zones: The Art of CD-Rom* to foreground portable interactive art made on the eve of internet art. Of the eighty CD-Roms from seventeen countries, I could manage to exhibit only three works from Asia by the Japanese artists Masaki Fujihata, Takahiko Iimura, and the trio of Koonosake Mihara, Tatsuo Tajimi, and Testuzo Hirai. When I began working in China in 2000, the curator Shin-Yi Yang then introduced me to Feng Mengbo and Qui Zhijie both of whom produced portable interactive works. Feng animated picture books and songs from the Cultural Revolution for his net.art piece, *Phantom Tales*, which was commissioned by the Dia Center for the Arts, → while Qui developed a power-point style CD-Rom project, *The West*, in response to the 1999 NATO bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Yugoslavia. → Ironically the very motivation for *The West* exemplifies how the development of Asian new media has remained anchored in the contrasting physicality of unsitely performance. → This is a point made poignantly by Thomas J. Berghuis when he reflects on the ambivalence of Qui's embrace of new media in «*Transcending Media*» and *the Role of Contemporary Art Practices in China*. In speaking of Qui's preference for media events organized around the coming together in a common physical space of the media and the participants, Berghuis concludes that «artists in China tend to approach new media art (*xin meiti*) in ways that allow them to create direct interactions with the public, often through live art, rather than being primarily technology-focused.» → It well could be that the importance of public interactions with new media art, particularly as predominantly mediated through video and installation in mainland China, can be attributed as much to the complexities of the government's extensive operation of internet censorship as to anything else. But the cases of Taiwan, Japan, and Korea reveal a far more complex utilization of the internet as something more of a background interface that enhances physical installations than as the material substrata of artistic practice and experience itself.

It was in this context of thinking the unsitely, as a resistant slippage from internet culture to performance venue and public response, that Yao Jui-Chung came to mind as the penultimate example of the paradox of developments across Asian new media art and culture. As our conversation progressed in spurts over the internet, it became all the clearer to me that Yao's work is motivated by a conceptual framework that has striking commonalities with my own curatorial and theoretical commitment to networked art and culture. What remains particularly striking is Yao's resistance to this culture at the same time that its conceptual framework and media context remain paramount to the political imperative of his artistic practice for which site and unsiteliness conjoin. Indeed, it was on this very topic of siteliness that we began our discussion.

→ *Contact Zones: The Art of CD-Rom*.
See: <http://contactzones.cit.cornell.edu/>

→ Feng Mengbo: *Phantom Tales*,
Dia Center for the Arts.
See: <http://diacenter.org/mengbo/>

→ I provide more detailed readings of
The West and Phantom Tales in
*The Paradox of Chinese Art in
the Age of Technology*. *Neural.it*
(English edition), 29 (2008), 38–39.

→ Qui Zhijie: *The West*. CD-Rom, 1999.
See: http://www.artlinkart.com/en/artist/wrk_sr/3a3avz/89ehuB

→ Thomas R. Berghuis: «*Transcending Media*» and the Role of Contemporary Art Practices in China.
Experimenta: Mesh 17 (New Media Art in Australia and Asia)
See: <http://www.experimenta.org/mesh/mesh17/berghuis.htm>

< **timothy murray** > Your conceptually laden performance and installation work has always played rather irreverently with the tension between deeply over-determined national sites, whether in Taiwan or China, and the distributed practices of an artist who reflects on the slippage of any investment in notions of «pure site» or «pure beauty.» Perhaps something similar could be said about the politics, both identity and nation, of your projects that overflow with the passion of investment while divesting themselves of any simplistic assumptions about the promise of the internet or idealistic national solutions, particularly when it comes to addressing the complex history of Taiwan's colonial legacy, from Japan to China. At the same time, your work consistently solicits and seduces the spectators with seductive displays of gilded toilets, spectacularly bluish environments, stunningly ordered arrangements of serial photographs and surreal paintings only then to confront them with the realistic overlays of shit, piss, ruin, and excess that constitute the realistic core and fabric of everyday life.

Before we get into a discussion of any specific projects, perhaps we might reflect on the importance of «unsiteliness» as a concept that may be pertinent to the history of your interventions as they depart from the specific national and political site of Taiwan. One starting point would be the mere fact that many of your projects stage unsiteliness by exhibiting the deterritorialization of site. This happens both through content, such as your emphasis on environmental and geopolitical issues, and through form, such as your indirect decontextualization of specific sites when their photographs and video sequences are exhibited in juxtaposition with others in a way that foregrounds seriality as much as locality, a point to which I hope we might return later. But even more telling is when you shoot yourself, throughout your extensive *History Maneuver* series either pissing on, surrendering to, or mocking the monuments of Taiwanese and Chinese history. And, later, in the late 1990s and 2000s, when your mocking presence is no longer the center of your photographs and paintings, the spectator is confronted and haunted by scores of photographs of sacred and secular ruins, often inhabited by specters of petrified dinosaurs and obsolete gods. This then gets transformed into epic paintings that depict, among other things, the *Cynic Republic*. Key then, it seems to me, is your aesthetic fascination, maybe obsession, with the contamination of site itself as a venue of spiritual and nationalistic reverence.

< **yao jui-chung** > In relation to this juxtaposition of aesthetics and ruins, I am interested in the power operations behind ruins. It could also be said that I depend on artistic practice to look at what the ruins have generated and construct my idea of political geography. For example, the great amount of military architecture that was constructed during the Cold War due to the cross-strait situation, and then the subsequent cutbacks in the military, resulted in many abandoned structures. The many jails for political prisoners that were constructed during this period, for example, serve as testimonials to the absurdity and severity of the Cold War period. The many abandoned factories I have documented also suggest the movement of industry to China in search

of greater profits under the conditions of globalization, and because of the unique political relationship between Taiwan and China, Taiwan is being eviscerated in the process. Recently, I organized a project requiring students to photograph abandoned public spaces throughout Taiwan, highlighting the shadow of political struggle cast over the spaces resulting from failed government policies. This project was intended to put pressure on the government and bring about changes in official policies, thus serving as a successful case of art intervening on society.

< **timothy** > It may appear from your early emphasis on Taiwan and its tumultuous return in your recent series that highlights expensive public architecture projects that lie abandoned in ruins that your work might nevertheless run counter to the very notion of unsiteliness with which we began and that Maria Miranda has articulated so forcefully in the introduction to this volume. But what I've gleaned from our conversations over the past decade is that «site» and «siteliness» are very loaded terms in your repertoire. What might make them «unsitely» is not so much the virtuality of artistic expression on the internet, although the network remains crucial for the dissemination of your projects and politics internationally, but more the very forcefulness, power, and affect that effective socio-political work enacts, perhaps in a way that destabilizes both the artistic object and the geopolitical source of its inspiration.

< **yao** > Whether or not art should reflect local historical or political conditions is really not my chief concern. Every place has its own specific context, and I am only using my art to make some tragic and self-deprecating jokes about my own value within this context while addressing the inexplicable black hole that is history. There always has been a lot of social unrest in Taiwan, and the atmosphere has been such that magnificence could potentially arise out of ruins. Nativism became a means of resisting both authority and traditional Chinese orthodoxy. Even though the art world was insufficiently supported in Taiwan at the time, artists still had tenacity, unlimited passion, conviction, and of course indispensable insight and critical spirits. I just recently realized how much I have been influenced by my upbringing at a time of political transition in Taiwan, as it still influences the way I address challenges and difficulties in contemporary society with my art.

< **timothy** > As you might remember, when we first met a decade ago in Taipei, you and the video artist, Tsui Kuang-Yu, took me to the offices of the Taiwanese new media collective, Et@t, where you introduced me to the young generation of new media artists working in Taiwan. Among other things, this collective curated a biannual exhibition of international sound art whose primary material consisted of the «immateriality» of digital detritus. Although primarily identified as a photographer and installation artist, you have been tremendously important to me as a champion and spokesperson for new media art in Taiwan or, at the very least, for the advantages of relying on digital platforms, whether photographic or networked, for stretching the boundaries of media

or for extending the reach of local Taiwanese art across the globe. This was most evident when I was last in Taipei a year and half ago and we cruised the scene on gallery night. There we encountered artists and curators from across Asia who happened to be in Taipei to celebrate the opening of the bi-annual exhibition of new media art at the Taiwan Museum of Contemporary Art. This show featured exceptionally innovative installations and animations by young Taiwanese artists as well as established Asian practitioners the likes of Norimichi Hirakawa from Japan whose installations have screened visualizations of the flow of the internet as a component of his complicated interactive interfaces. The ongoing excitement over internet culture and new media art in Taiwan, first catalyzed by the interventions of Et@t in the late nineties, became further evident to me when you took me out to the 2009 Asian Art Biennial at the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts in Taichung. This massive exhibition on *Viewpoints and Viewing Points*, curated by Chao-Yi Tsai, attested to the proliferation of stunning animations from across greater Asia (with even more in an adjacent exhibition celebrating contemporary Korean art) and also featured some complex and fascinating interactive new media interventions by international artists of renown, such as Xu Bing whose simple use of the internet performs the visual and signification ambiguities of communication. These were not only the kinds of installations that some art historians might deny as «art» but also indicators of an international energy or force in art practice that derives its edge from the internet and global exchange.

< **yao** > As for Taiwanese contemporary art under the sway of the internet and globalization, I would agree that the young generation is indeed sparing no effort to expand our knowledge of aesthetic and perceptual experience, and in doing so, is casting off the «exalted» constructions of the previous generation. In the wake of more recent trends in globalization and digital technologies, these topics have receded, and inevitably, Taiwanese contemporary art has been impacted by consumer culture with international styles replacing local aesthetics. Most younger artists are no longer interested in grand narratives, nor do they directly challenge traditional or exalted values, but rather use gentler, more personal strategies, avoid problems (both intentionally and unintentionally), and escape into their own communities. So it could be a mistake merely to celebrate the «site» of the internet and the purity of new media. While most of this work is clever, ethereal and speaks of personal experience, this is not enough. If they cannot construct their pastiche of fragments on a fully elaborated genealogy of knowledge, then the superficiality of their project is likely to cause it to collapse. It is knowledge that expands the horizons of the local, while lending depth to the seduction of digital globality.

< **timothy** > Might it be true that the genealogy of knowledge, as you put it, is directly related to the specifics of locale and the cultural context of one's development as an artist? I've been struck by how many Taiwanese artists are somewhat loyal or at least deeply embedded in a local history that their own work seems so ready to challenge. Perhaps the loyalty is more important

to such a genealogy than to either networked expansion or «site-specifics» itself. Your remarks remind me of Michel Foucault's tremendously insightful book, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, written at the outset of the development of open source code, in which he situates knowledge in relation to the expansiveness and unsettledness of archives and other closed formations of identity. Perhaps the genealogy of knowledge is more consequential than geography itself? Or perhaps, in your case, geography, the specificity of Taiwan, is what has given rise to the very expansion of knowledge that then challenges any notion of border retreat.

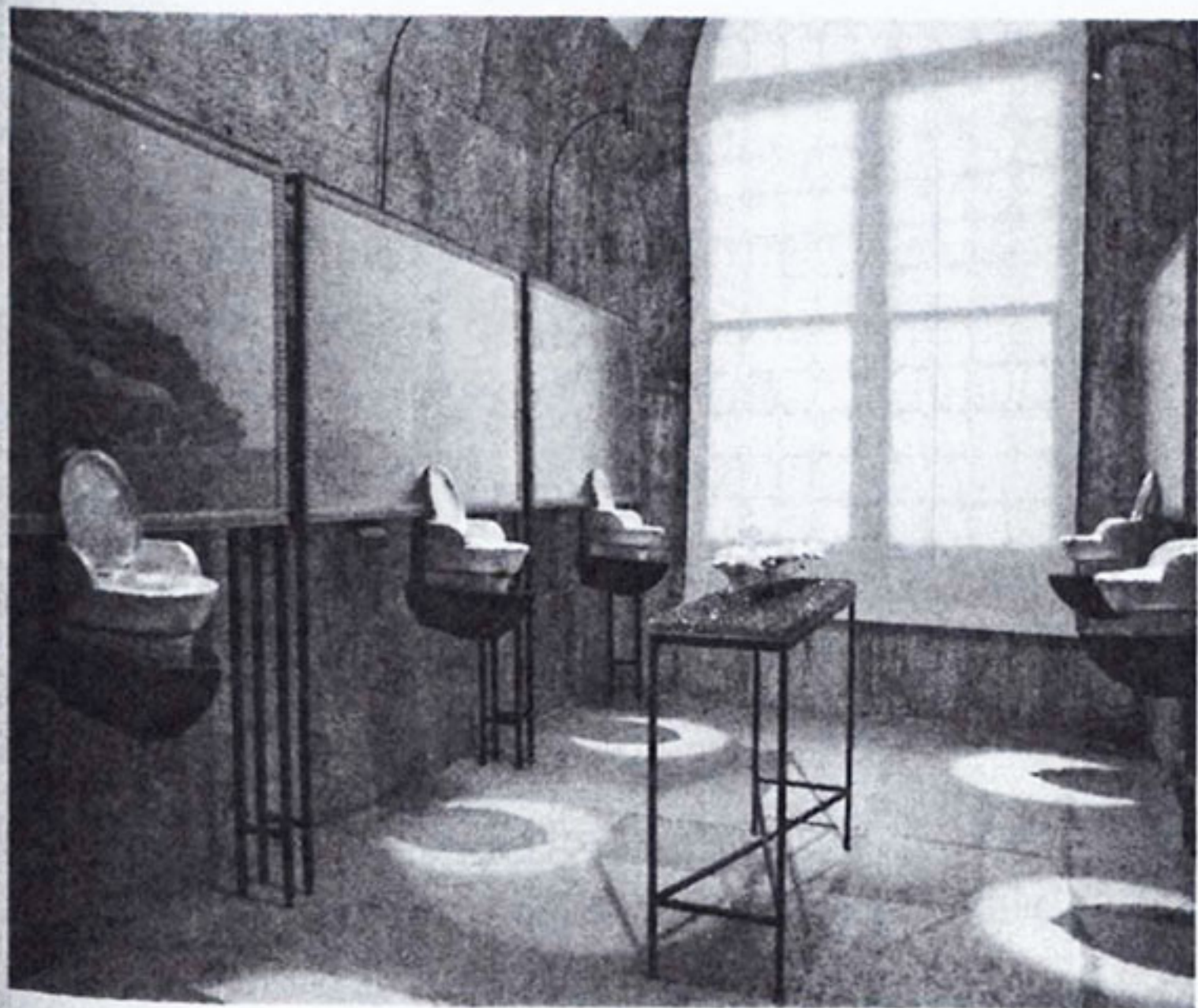
< **yao** > I received the national education that was compulsory in Taiwan at the time. One day I realized our familiar history textbook was filled with lies and tended to avoid difficult issues while emphasizing trivial ones. This realization, in addition to my father's death (he was a KMT official who fled to Taiwan after the Civil War), made me both suspicious and curious about my own origins, of which I was completely ignorant. For these reasons, I attempt to peel back the layers of this onion-like conundrum which is me, my past, the memories of all Taiwanese people and even a period of world history that cannot be erased. A marked characteristic of the period around the end of martial law, for example, was the use of art to alleviate depression and resentment caused by long-term oppression. Critiques of society, political issues, awakening of native consciousness, folk culture, and challenges to traditional aesthetics and values were all important topics in 1990s. Since the Taiwanese art market has yet to become over-hyped like China's, most artists are still working diligently at their art and not being influenced by the market. While the scale of the market in Taiwan is small, its orientation is more extensive and many artists maintain a high degree of experimentalism and independence, creating work with high degrees of accomplishment and rigor. As a country that is continually suppressed by China and marginalized by the rest of the world, Taiwan is one place in the world that prizes creative freedom, and this is the main reason why I make art in Taiwan. It is in relation to this combination that we might think about the power of increased knowledge to expand concepts of the local.

< **timothy** > Still, there's something of a paradox that drives your own relation to knowledge, isn't there? I'm thinking not only of the label you gave to yourself and your peers in the early 1990s as very young artists working at the end of martial law, «New Fishy Generation» (with a combined emphasis on smelly and suspicious) but also of the series that first put your own smelly body on the map, so to speak, *Territory Take Over*. For this installation, shown in 1997 at the Venice Biennale, you aesthetically documented a prior performance installation at IT Park in Taiwan (1994) for which your own pissing on the exhibition site was replicated by photographs of you pissing on six monuments marking specific colonial incursions against Taiwan by the Spanish, Dutch, Japanese, and Chinese. Of course this is one of the installations where you mix the ruins of colonialism, the aggression of the artist literally pissing on history, and the aesthetic attraction of golden toilets hanging at the bottom of the

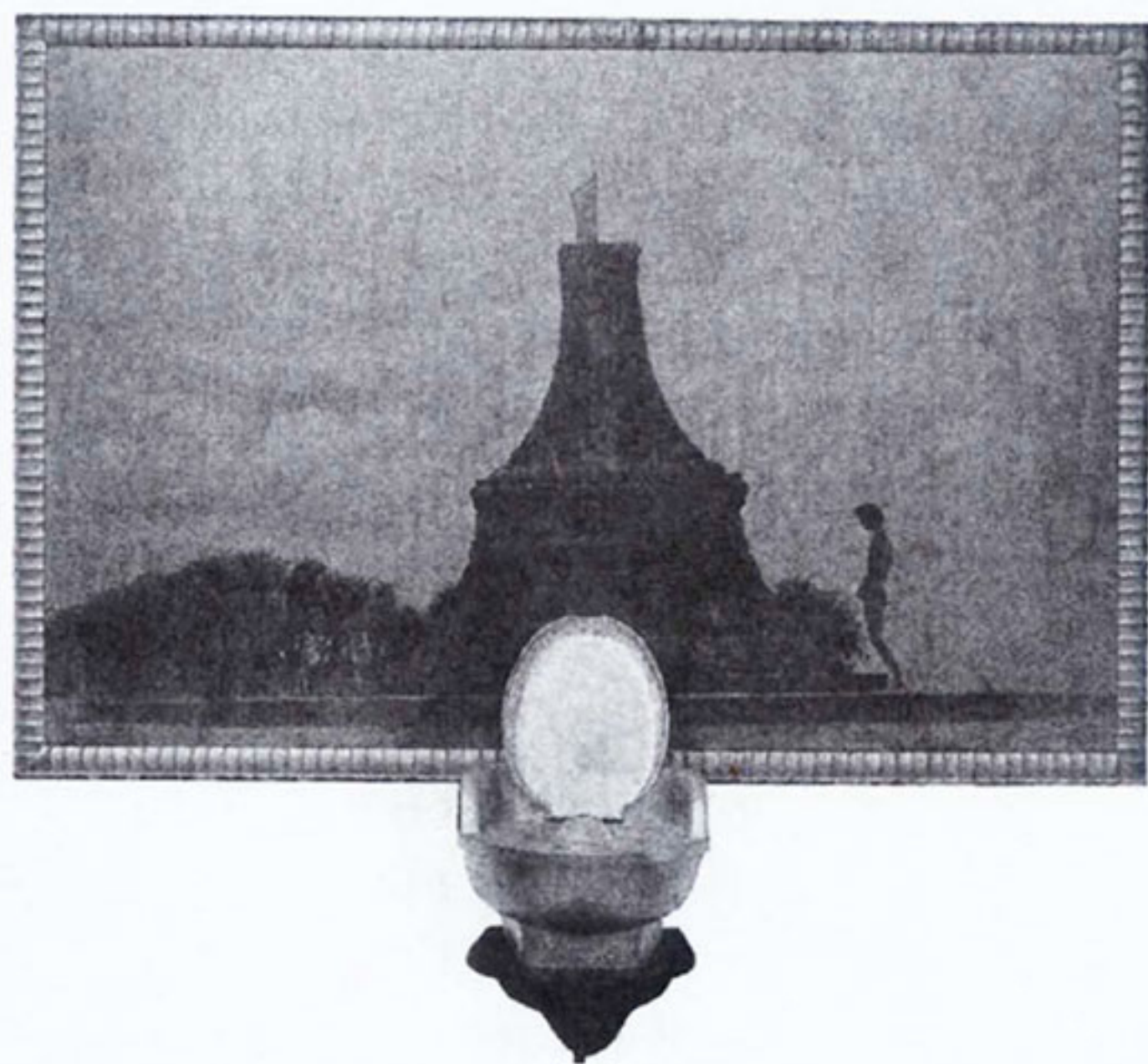
photographic frames, as if inviting the spectators themselves to piss on the purity of aesthetics and the imaginary of an uncolonized Taiwan. It's curious how your combination of historical research that gave rise to your selection of colonial monuments and the performative play of your personal intervention seems to solicit notions of both knowledge and performance that might run counter to conventional understandings of art and its reception. Something smells fishy here, no?

< **yao** > Most Taiwanese artists active before my generation maintained a negative and powerless attitude toward history. I think this was more of a political stance, rather than an aesthetic one. Colonialism was undoubtedly a nightmare for the third world, but excessive indulgence in playing the victim doesn't help anyone address the future. At the time, Taiwan was engaged in a debate over nativism, which prompted me to wonder, why nativism? What is subjectivity? With my artwork, I didn't expect to stage an emotional rehashing of painful histories, but rather chose satire and humor, photographing myself urinating outdoors, to compare unlawful colonization to a feral dog marking territory. In Taiwan, urinating on the ground outdoors is illegal, yet urinating into your own portable toilet outdoors is fine. With the small golden toilets placed in front of my photographs and wordplay (as *shit* and *history* happen to be homophonous in the Mandarin language), I meant to suggest the self-legitimizing strategies often used by colonizers to gild their decidedly less than sterling (shitty, actually) histories. My 1994 work → *Territory Take Over* was related to my enthusiasm for climbing mountains in Taiwan that are over three thousand meters high. Once while climbing Jade Mountain (the tallest peak in Taiwan at 3,954 meters) I felt very confused by the imposing bronze statue of Yu Youren erected at the summit, and urinated beside it as I really needed to go to the bathroom. This gave me the idea of creating an artwork by urinating in various places around Taiwan. Later, after reading up on four hundred years of Taiwanese history (during the martial law period we weren't taught Taiwanese history and most people of my generation studied KMT history in school), I decided to stage this artwork in places where various colonizers first entered Taiwan. I chose to pose for the photographs completely naked to raise the verisimilitude of the results, as dogs don't wear clothing. Being an introvert by nature, however, I struggled for several months before steeling my savage animal nature and marking territory the only way a dog can: naked and with urine. Ultimately, these smelly photographs infused my later work with its intense geopolitical flavor

< **timothy** > Another fascinating aspect of your work, Yao, is its inscription in action, first exemplified by the *Action Series*. In *Recovering Mainland China* (1997) you photograph your rigid body in the act of jumping in front of recognizable Chinese monuments – a commentary on the KMT's unachievable ambition to recover the mainland, you both jump into something «new» only to land back in exactly the same position as before. In *The World is for All* (1997–2000) you reflect on post-colonialism by standing with your hands up



Yao Jui-Chung: *Territory Takeover*.
Installation, Venice Bienale, 1997



Yao Jui-Chung: *Territory Takeover*.
Photography and mixed media, 1994.

in the air in front of the architectural gates designating Chinatowns throughout the world: Brisbane, Paris, Toronto, London, New York, Victoria, Vancouver, Yokohama, San Francisco. And in your very ambitious series, *Long March* (2002–2004), you retrace the route of the Long March and shoot yourself standing upside down in front of sites of importance of the Revolution. This topsy-turvy intervention then becomes embodied in your brief 2005 video piece, *China Town Dizzy*, in which the gate of Yokohama, the site of the world's largest Chinatown, rotates in 360 degree motion as if miming the still shot at its center of your standing upside down. Here the literal commercial and cultural network of international Chinatown gets reversed on its axis in rotating perspectival vortex. Action for you, thinking back to something Maria Miranda said to me about unsitely and uncertain aesthetics, seems to enact the event of transit and transition, through which art itself comes to stand unsteadily «in transit.» Even with your series title, *Action Series*, you seem to unsettle the prominence of «action» in contemporary art history by displacing the «action» of painting, as the artistic form and individual prowess of abstract expressionism, with the combined actions of historical research, photographic series, and your own irreverent insertion of your subjectivity into the field of the photograph. Rather than reenacting action as something akin, say, to the signature of the genius of abstraction, à la Jackson Pollock, you seem to reinvent it for art as the perversion of photographic realism and as the cynicism of your critical commentary on social history.

< yao > Basically my cynicism and irreverence in this work is a critical reaction to the view of so-called Chinese orthodoxy in Taiwan. It seems history is always written by the victors, but the historical view held by the vanquished or marginalized is often more credible, or at least has reference value. The modern history of Asia, or that of China, is a history of struggle against western colonization, and is related to complex issues of the colonizing force of modernity and wholesale modernization. I didn't intend to discuss these issues in the works you mentioned (I dealt with this in the later series *Roaming around the Ruins*), but rather the work had a direct connection to my search for identity. My father was a KMT party member who retreated to Taiwan in 1949, and the sole spiritual sustenance for people of his generation lay in their plan to retake the Mainland. However, the KMT's inability to rout the communists during earlier stages of the Civil War and Mao Zedong's ascent during the Long March, foretold both the necessity of resisting the Mainland communists and the ultimate failure of the KMT plan. Second generation forty-niners like myself were haunted by a floating feeling caused by our long-term geographical displacement (for example, we were limited in our knowledge of Taiwanese history, and the Mainland place names we memorized in school were frozen in 1949 and thus seriously out of step with reality), and no amount of political coercion could erase our inevitable destiny or the fact that our history was not tied to the earth and defied gravity – on the contrary – it made the situation all the more absurd. In my *Recovering Mainland China* photographs, I am like a wandering ghost or perhaps a retired soldier on tour. Either way, the figure



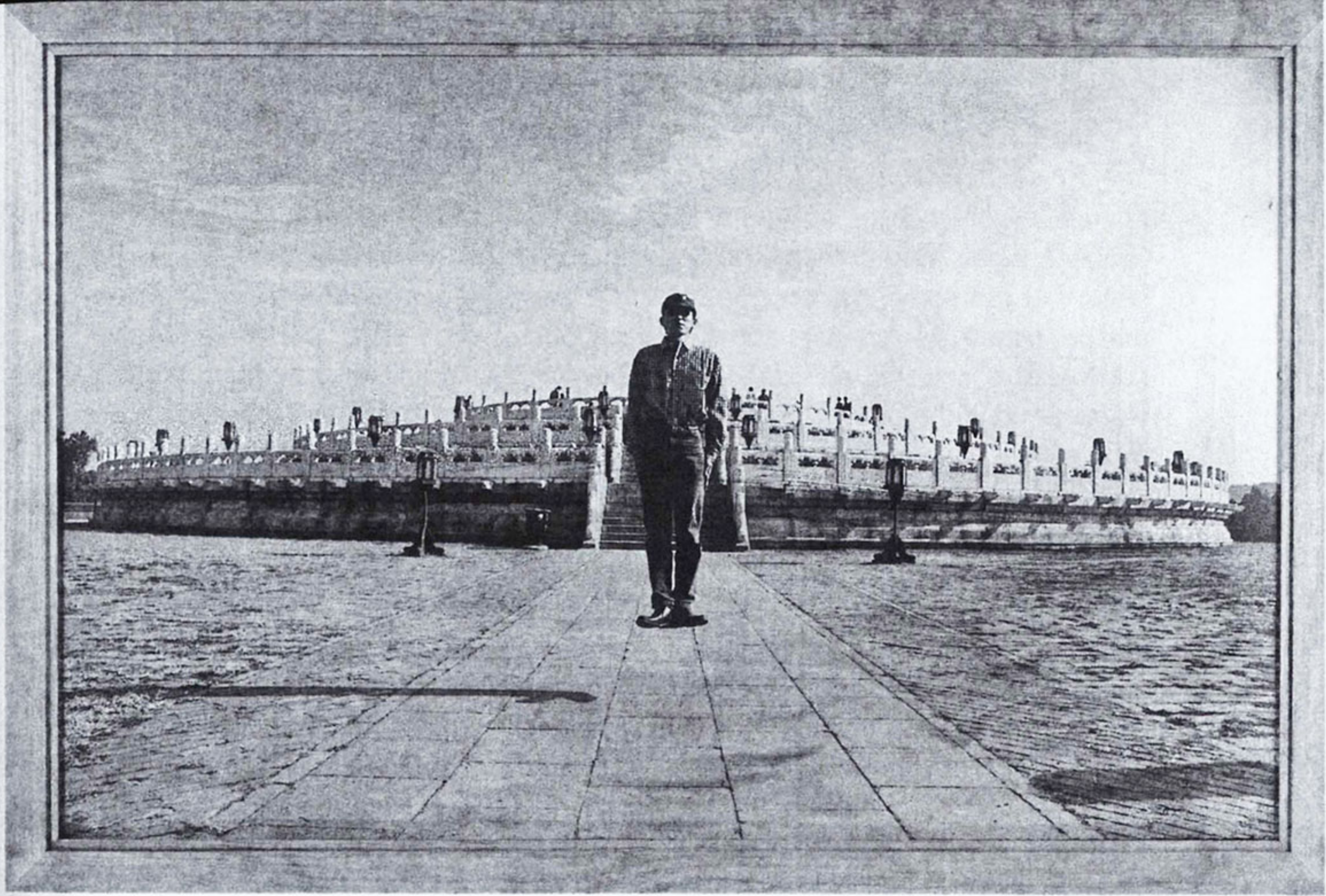
Recover Mainland China – Action

I started serving in the air force in 1994. Since then I have collected all sort of official documents, in order to reveal the procedures of thought-control by the governmental machine. After my discharge I immediately travelled to the Mainland to photograph *Recover Mainland China – Action*. Against the backgrounds of famous historical attractions, I hopped in the upright posture to create the illusion of levitating. This «superficial» visit to the Mainland comments on the absurdity of history and a sense of disconnection, and also deconstructs the torment suffered in the previous era. Even if the younger generation had no choice other than having been born into the mystifying course of history, something has to be said with regards to how we arrived in these circumstances! In my own words from before, «Human history is hopelessly absurd in its destiny!» It has been, is, and will always be a condition we cannot escape.

in each photograph is not me, but rather is meant to represent a generation which could not escape its historical destiny. Political situations suggested by the backgrounds in the photographs were carefully selected, as were the costumes, and even the distressed effect of these black and white photographs was meticulously added. In October 1996, when I photographed myself jumping at various historical sites in Beijing, I never imagined that by jumping into the past, I would in effect be rewriting its future. While I had hoped to prevent images previously frozen by one historical reality from reconsolidating, I never imagined that preconceived notions of these historical images would be erased by the audience's bemusement, or that my humor would result in the continual reinterpretation of these historical sites.

< **timothy** > I remain fascinated by your early insistence on both performance and installation as fundamental aspects of action. Many Chinese artists have made important commentaries either through the means of documentary photography or disorienting performance. Documentary photography has been especially important in both Taiwan and the mainland, not only in relation to your most recent reclamation projects but also on the mainland as a testimony of difficult working conditions, housing situations, and even the plight of the migrant as made so evident in Yang Shin-Yi's 2004 Beijing exhibition, *Artists with Migrants*, which he curated for the UNESCO *Together With Migrants* Initiative under the Project for Poverty Reduction. → As for the corollary interest in disorienting performance, we only need call to mind Tsui Kuang-Yu's video series of himself vomiting in different locations or another disorienting series that documents various objects coming as if from nowhere to hit him on the head. But few artists have so insistently embraced performance only to freeze it, as you have done. I have been meaning to ask you for a long time about your commitment to «freezing» performative action within the frame of the photograph, in a way that seems to disorient photography while disembodimenting performance.

< **yao** > This is a very interesting question. The archive I created about contemporary Taiwanese art and my photography are both extensions of my interest in historical documentation. From a certain perspective photographs are like postage stamps. By taking pictures we can make postage stamps about our personal experiences and then enjoy sharing them with friends. As a shy person, I'm uncomfortable making my art in front of large crowds, preferring rather to meet my audience through some kind of medium. Just as you observed, I freeze decisive moments in my performative photographs, and I imbue my work with amateurish theatricality. A big part of the work is kuso, which I deploy by freezing action in my photographs. In other words, the work is a kind of anti-performance created with simple poses and actions, rather than stunts that anyone could perform. I urinate, jump while posing at attention, do handstands, put my hands up in surrender, goosetep, salute or wave. All of these postures tend to be political in nature as they mimic those used by politicians when dealing with the media. I don't intend to emphasize my bodily presence



Yao Jui-Chung: *Recover Mainland China – Action.*

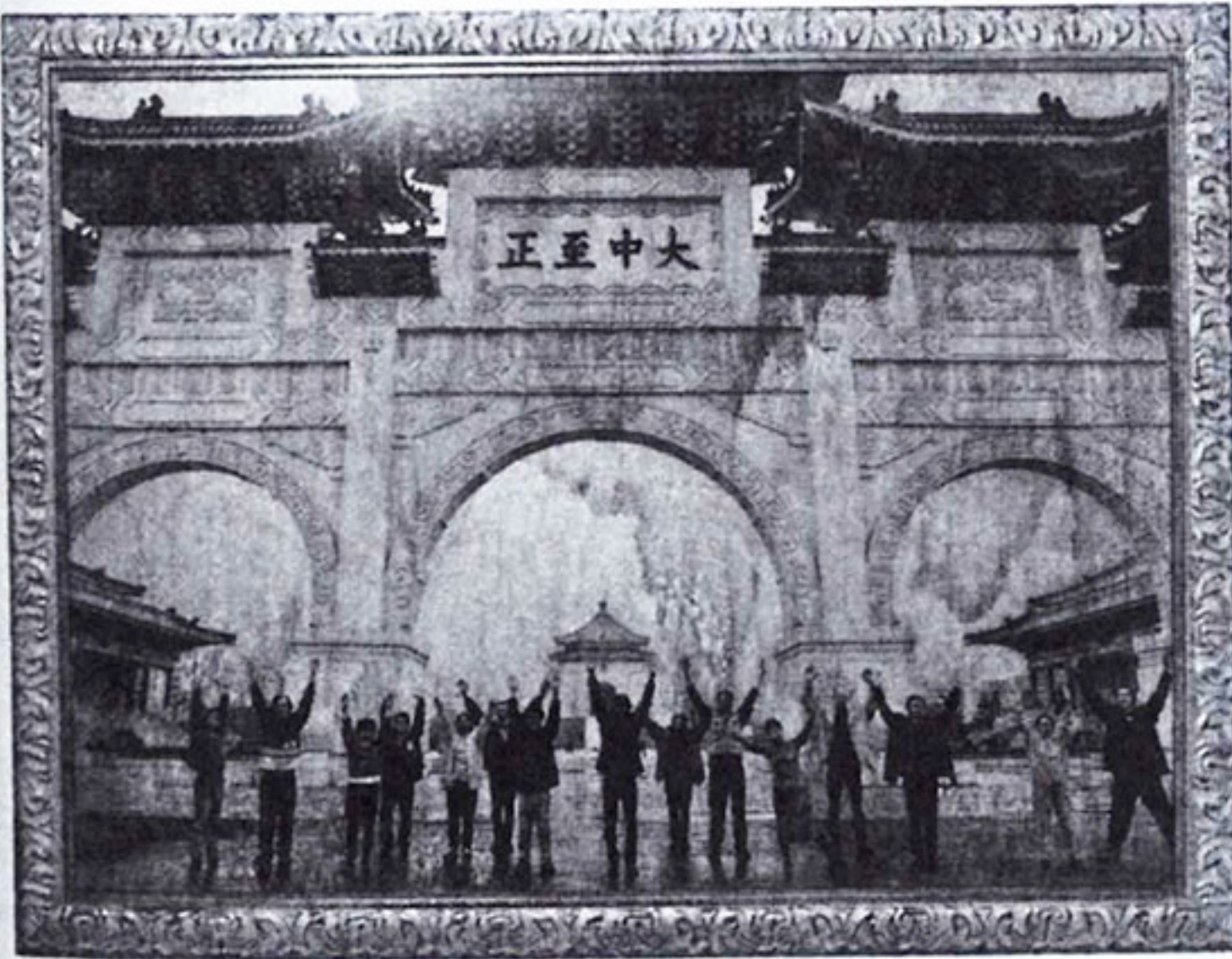
→ UNESCO: *Together with migrants.* Beijing, 2004.

at a site, but rather the absurdity of a body restricted by politics. I hope that by freezing these moments in time I can liberate those who have been frozen by history or ideology. While I've also made performance videos, such as *Phantom of History*, *March Past* and *Mt Jade Floating*, they aren't performances recorded at a specific site, but rather attempts at mimicking political mechanisms used in the past to brainwash the masses, and thus have a pronounced geopolitical flavor

< **timothy** > Still even when you freeze your performative events, your attentiveness to the action of installation frequently seems to re-enliven or unfreeze your stilled performances as they are reenacted in the context of serialized installation. Part of the conceit of your photographic work is its insistence on seriality, which relates the site-specificity of individual photographs into the stream of juxtaposition, comparison, and narrative. Might we also think about serialism itself, as it functions in your work, as constituting another paradox of the unsitely? And in some cases, the very architectonics of your installations seem to re-enliven it further with the cinematic effect of exhibited serialism. I'm thinking of how you installed → *The World is for All* on raised architectural frames in the round so that the spectatorial vision moves from within the circular vision of the series. This not only calls to mind the staged seriality of nineteenth-century panorama devices but more recent 360 degree new media installations, such as the colossal 360 cinematic panorama by Tim Gruchy, *Clesthya's Undoing*, which we enjoyed at the Asia Art Biennale. There's something in your installations that call to mind this kind of decentralization of point of view and panoramic vision in a way that foregrounds the floating edge, the constant adjustment of motion, and the vocabularies of fading and mixing.

< **yao** > In my 360-degree panoramic photo installation *The World is for All* (1997–2000), I used carved, gold painted frames and black and white photography to heighten the contrast with the work's Chinatown imagery. My primary emphasis, however, was not on visual impact, but rather on an allusion to political metaphor which is basically composed of three layers. First, by creating a large circle in the venue with ten door-shaped frames, I suggest the global reach of Chinese culture. Displayed within the frames are archways that seem to be in China, but in fact were photographed in various Chinatowns around the world. These areas seem like small city-states, or perhaps satellite states, but the center around which they orbit is not China, but rather Confucianism, which forms the foundation of Chinese culture. While the declaration of territory made by the archways in the photos is quite strong, the abstract governing relationship suggested by the work doesn't involve political entities. The second layer of the metaphor involves the kinship system in Chinese society, which is organized based on interdependent power relationships. The circular arrangement of the installation suggests the values, class awareness and lifestyle that form the closed circle of a kinship system. In Chinese society, this system operates much like a country and is on par with local governments, but exerts even more influence. The final layer of the political metaphor reflects a

→



The World is for All – China Beyond China

Chinatown often becomes, to the natives, a hot spot for trafficking and drug dealing, a destination for cheap goods and labour, or even one of the stereotypes in Hollywood movies, a haven for all outlaws. I therefore adapted the movie scenes of police arrests into a circular shooting range, with ten images, an air gun in the middle and the warning mounted on a pedestal: «You have the right to remain silent; everything you say can and will be held against you in a court of law.» Aiming at the unidentified figures in black with both arms held high in surrender, the audience play the policing role in the standard procedure of apprehension.

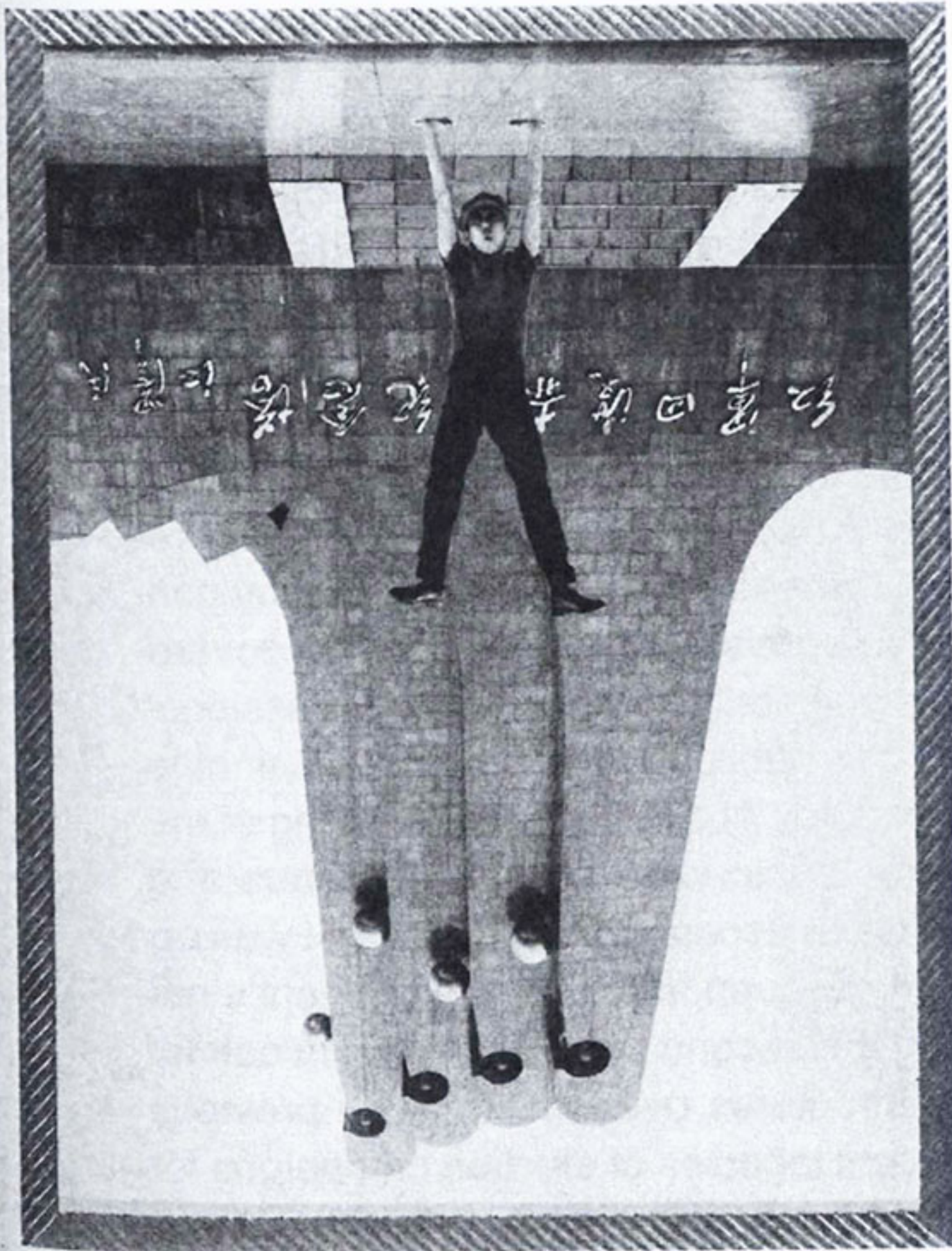
The shooting game is critical of colonial mentality and reflects on stigmatised stereotypes of immigrants.

reality of physical space. It was once said that the sun never sets on the British Empire, and likewise it seems the moon is ever rising on a Chinatown somewhere. Provided that Chinese people occupy a place, there is a Chinatown there, and it becomes increasingly bustling as the night wears on. I placed a toy gun in the center of the installation so that viewers could pick it up and, like a police officer, interrogate the unknown figures in the surrounding photographs. There is a sign next to the gun that reads, «You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say or do can and will be held against you in the court of law.» With this I suggest that those in power often use legal means to supervise or prosecute foreigners, whom they view with prejudice, to consolidate their power and gain the greatest advantage.

< **timothy** > I'm also interested, given its commonality in our work – yours artistic and mine theoretical – in the theory of seriality itself, particularly as it pertains to the uncertainty of aesthetics. As I reflect in *Digital Baroque* when writing on the sequences of Peter Greenaway, the philosopher Gilles Deleuze emphasizes the interstice as inscribed in the seriality or its staging of the difference of duration and time. → Deleuze reads modern cinema as profiting from a move away from the centralized truth-content of movement and panorama to the constant adjustment of a more democratic space and depth. Thus providing for an «art of masses,» the new depth of field stages the differential of space and time in contrast to the equation of place and subject; it engages repetition rather than representation; and it frames the disparate as opposed to the identical. While these kinds of shifts and shifters might be understood to constitute the networked openness of internet culture, your work similarly has prompted me to think further about the differentials of seriality and even the vibrant excessiveness of its theatricality when the playful simulations of fiction envelope the biting realities of history.

< **yao** > Your idea is very interesting, I have never thought of that before. There certainly is an element of seriality in my work, but I definitely didn't start out making the work with this in mind. It seems that certain things call to me, and every time I finish an artwork another problem waiting to be solved appears. For example, I came up with the idea of urinating where foreigners made incursions into Taiwan for my work *Territory Take Over* (1994) when I was atop Taiwan's highest peak thinking about Taiwan. I came up with my idea for *Recovering Mainland China* (1994–1996) during my military service in the air force. Feeling a certain kinship with Don Quixote because he also faced strange and changeable times, I threw myself into the torrent of modern Chinese history. Therefore the idea for this work came from China, which sits across the strait from Taiwan. *The World is for All* (1997–2000) is about Chinese communities living abroad. It seems these three works follow one another, but actually are related more like the layers of an onion; peeling back one layer naturally reveals another. There is also a little theatricality, but far less than the politics underpinning the artwork. The idea of reversal in my later work, *Long March* (2002–2004), is also a metaphor: if history could go in reverse, then the three

→ Timothy Murray: *Digital baroque: new media art and cinematic folds*.
Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008, p. 111–113.



Long March – Shifted the Universe

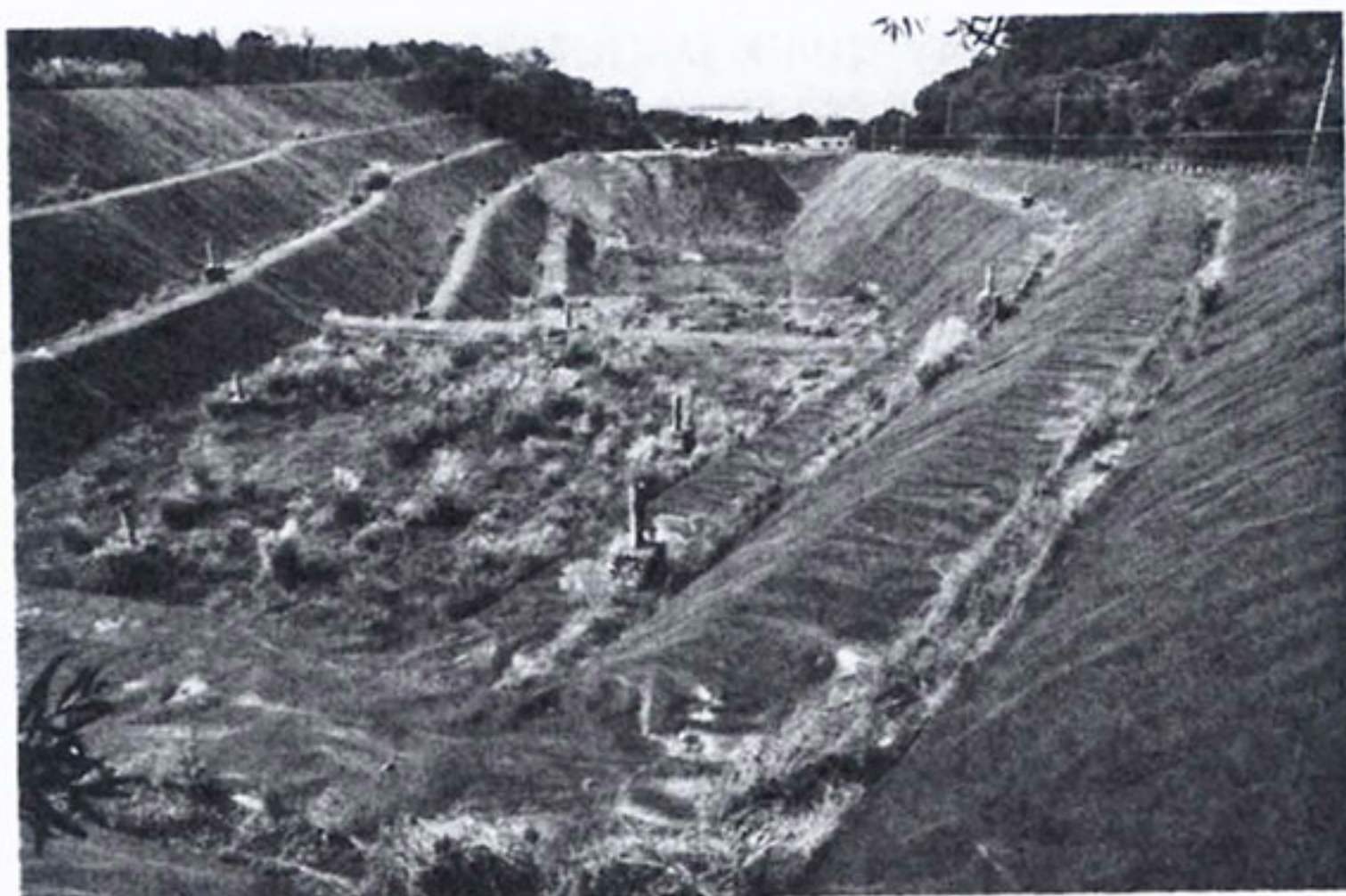
In the summer of 2002, I took part in the project of the Long March (of the Red Army, 1934–1936, referred to as the «Thousand-Mile Flee» by the Nationalist Party, or KMT). A group of us undertook the drawn-out and grueling journey, living the struggle and history of the Chinese Civil War. After surveying on-site to find shooting angles, I decided to photograph myself in the handstand position, and then displayed upside-down the large, black-and-white photos, in order to construct a disturbed imagery. Like most young people in Taiwan, I know little of this past, but what really interests me is the question of whether history could be rewritten. It might be a Quixote-like fantasy or wuxia romance in wanting to change the world. However the main reason to investigate the present Taiwan-China relation with art is not to illustrate the history or provoke ideological opposition. Through the contrast between the burden of history and our rebellious, willful action, it intends to reveal the absurdity in life beyond human control.

previous series of works wouldn't exist. Actually history cannot be changed, but our attitudes toward the past can be changed through art. Tradition can be changed, but we must first change our ways of seeing and thinking. My installation, photography and paintings all have one fundamental aspect, and that is I use them to subvert orthodoxy and consider the margins.

< **timothy** > Given the success of your artistic career and your prominence in art circles in Taiwan, perhaps we can discuss your recent activities that seem to emphasize artistic collaboration over individual creation. This would include not merely your role in sponsoring open gallery spaces in Taipei, where the gallery site is mixed with the irreverence of bar and performance spaces, but, most importantly, your recently successful «public art» project for which, if I understand correctly, you served primarily as the conceptual manager of a massive undertaking for which you solicited scores of students to traverse Taiwan to document abandoned public works projects, government buildings, cultural centers, and gardens. Your students not only documented these unsightly sites photographically, but also compiled data concerning their negative impact on the economy, etc. For this project you seem to have stretched your private aesthetic interests in ruins and performance into the heart of the public sphere, from broad television coverage to direct response from the federal government. I'm very interested in how this collaborative project on the unsightly has had profound impact not only on the means and authority of artistic production but also on national politics?

< **yao** > I started an alternative space called VT Artsalon with a group of artists, which was meant to advance the cause of contemporary art in Taiwan by introducing young and talented artists. We have adopted a more nimble approach in this difficult art environment, hoping to fight for a way out. As for the → *Mosquito Project*, we were quite successful at challenging government policies, as Premier Wu Den-yi promised a moratorium on these kinds of government buildings. I even arranged for some of the students to attend a meeting of the Executive Yuan, where the students suggested that the government review its policies and release some of its disused public spaces for use by non-profit or public welfare organizations. It was also suggested that the government provide necessary assistance and gear its thinking towards professional needs (rather than merely pandering to the public) so as to attain sustainable development and not just temporary solutions. At a subsequent meeting of the Executive Yuan the premier gave a directive to carry out these matters and hold those who were negligent in their duties accountable. Of course I was optimistic about the results and expressed my support for the government's attitude, but nonetheless, we are preparing the second *Mosquito Project* book for next year, which will document public structures overlooked in the previous edition. Our intention is to document recent legacies of election campaigns for future generations studying this phase of Taiwanese society.

< **timothy** > Such an emphasis on documentation brings me to the overarch-



台中后里區(原台中縣后里鄉)垃圾衛生掩埋場
Hou-li Waste Sanitary Landfill, Taichung City
Construction started in 1999, completed in 2002
NT\$ 14,703,889

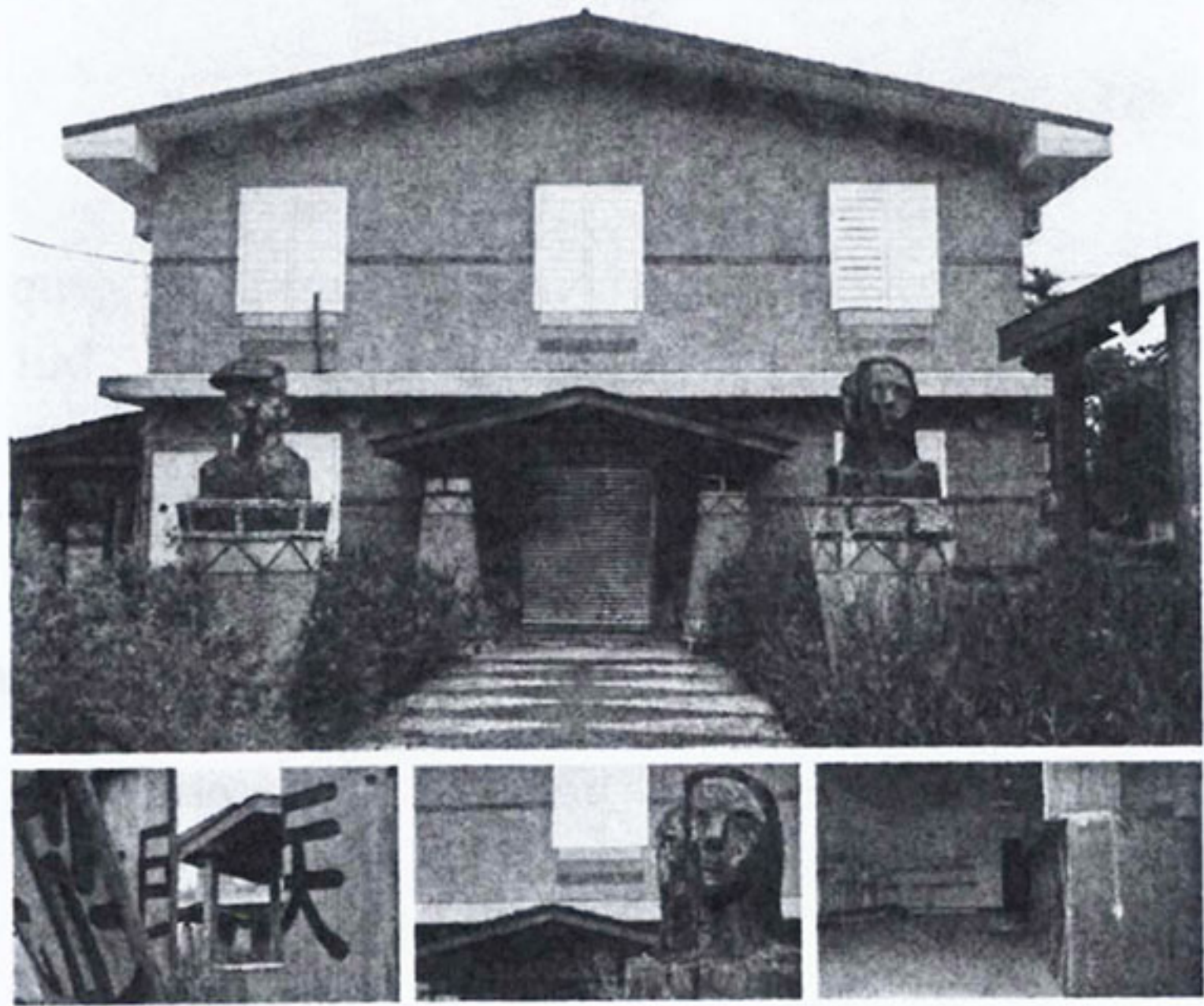
2011 · 台灣建築 · Hsin-Yan

Yao Jui-Chung: *Mosquito Project.*
Hou-li Sanitary Landfill, Taichung City.

ing obsession that always has fueled your art practice: what I call the «archival event.» Here I return again to Foucault's *Archeology of Knowledge* where he disturbs confidence in the historical archive by situating it not as something closed and passively awaiting archeological excavation. Rather he celebrates the «anarchive» as something of an inter-active event. It is precisely the surge of accumulation, the continual surprise of informational texture, and the layers of enunciational multiplicity that lend to the archive its enunciational power. The archive, he writes, is the horizon of «enoncés» marked by their «thickness of accumulation» which never cease «to modify, to change, to disturb, to upset, and sometimes to demolish.» → Such multi-layered thickness, which we might understand as a fractal conglomeration of accumulated data, is what constitutes the lively energetics of the archive's discourse. Something you and I share in common, in addition to our love for upside down people and artists who piss on revered landmarks, is our compulsion to give ourselves over to the archival event.

Indeed, you have generously collaborated with me by donating to the → Rose Goldsen Archive of New Media Art, which I curate in the Cornell Library, your extensive archive of Taiwanese performance and art videos, not to mention the 8,000 images you have digitized of postcards announcing all contemporary art openings across Taiwan since 1992 (you have to admit your obsession is rather perverse!). Although you probably would be reluctant to attribute to this project the status of an artistic event, akin to the many photographic projects we've already discussed, it certainly charts your own mobility as an artist and participant in contemporary Taiwanese art history. → Doesn't the fact that you personally supervised or actually performed the scanning and digital organization of these materials lend added significance to your Archive as something of a performance event? Indeed, I remember how, when we worked late into the night in Ithaca to recode the digital organization of these materials, you took off on a magically quick performance of the imagery on your computer as if a VJ mixing and matching his video and sound tracks. Buried deep within the code and quantity of these materials seem to be the many traces of your own conceptual commitment to and intervention in archivization as an artistic practice that also enfolds private and public practice and access.

< yao > I agree with your description of archival event. Surely there are some things connected with these archives, and this fascinates me. Nonetheless, I have some romantic ideas about archived imagery. While an individual's art-historical archive, that has necessarily been manipulated, is not at all like one found in a library or research institution, the latter isn't objective either, as it is the result of subjective choices and therefore reflects accumulated bias. I don't think there is any such thing as completely objective history, just like there isn't any such thing as completely objective artwork. Nonetheless, more than ten-thousand items can certainly serve as a good foundation for a study archive as well as an entry point for research and dialogue. I am interested in latent art histories that run parallel to official ones due to the possible connections this idea has with my own artwork. I have always been suspicious of authorita-



花蓮縣原住民族文化產業推廣中心
Hualien Aboriginal Cultural Industry Promotion Center
Completed in 2004
Cost unknown

2010 © 黃子福 Huang, Tzu-Jui

Yao Jui-Chung: *Mosquito Project*,
Hualien Aboriginal Cultural Industry Promotion Center.

→ Michel Foucault:
L'archéologie du savoir.
Paris: Gallimard, 1976, p. 164.

→ Rose Goldsen Archive of New Media Art,
Cornell Library Ithaca, New York.
See: <http://goldsen.library.cornell.edu/>

→ See my reading of this and similar Chinese archival projects in my essay
The Archival Event: Thinking Electronic Art Via Cornell's Goldsen Archive of New Media Art.
Intelligent Agent, 06.02 (August 2006), 1–7
See: http://www.intelligentagent.com/archive/Vol6_No2_pacific_rim_murray.htm

tive histories, and in my own books, photographs and materials I collect about art, I not only reflect mainstream values, but more importantly the perspectives of those who are marginalized. This can be seen in my fascination with ruins, which I photograph because of the traces of authority and violence behind them. Another example is my ongoing collection of exhibition announcements, which to a certain extent represent an aesthetic evolution through successive eras, and by analyzing the designs of these announcements, we can determine styles and trends at different times. Through the material quality of the invitations, the artist's pecuniary condition and individual taste can be determined, and we can also establish connections between various artistic trends and movements. I get great enjoyment from collecting these exhibition announcements.

Of course collecting is a never-ending quest and archives are never complete, but this impossibility means that we must forever strive to fill the gaps, and our desire to piece together the features of an age is motivated by the power of the fragments we find.

< **timothy** > It is your understanding of an archival aesthetics as both a never-ending quest and a viral incubator of overlapping cultural signifiers that makes it most appropriate, in my mind, for a provocative approach to unsitely aesthetics. It is in this way that your practice embodies, when not specifically miming, the novel archival conditions of artistic practice in the age of the internet.