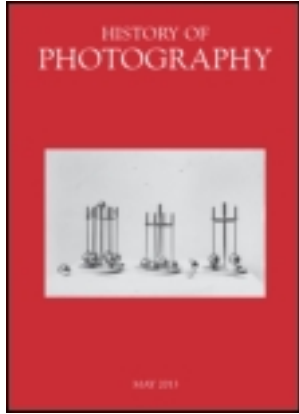


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The City Vanishes: Urban Landscape in Staged Chinese Photography

Jelena Stojkovic

Recent practice of staged photography in China renders views of urban landscapes as active elements in performative actions directed for the camera. These cityscapes, featured in photographs produced by artists such as Li Wei, Cao Fei, Chi Peng and Xing Danwen, not only reflect the country's rapid urbanisation but also ongoing processes of globalisation. The same processes reconfigure time-space relations around the globe and offer an opportunity to 'decentre' the world, but they equally escape capture and document in real time. Fictional photographic elaborations of their accompanying elements, such as the technologisation of culture and the inability to fix a stable image of the future, provide a point of departure to explore photography's role in response to the challenges posed by global urban living. This issue also creates a space for rethinking the critical potential of the medium.

Keywords: *Staged photography, cityscape, globalisation, fiction, Cao Fei (1978–), Xing Danwen (1967–), Chi Peng (1981–), Li Wei (1970–), Chinese contemporary photography*

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The emergence of photography-based art in China is rooted in the medium's relationship to the performance art scene in Beijing's East Village in the 1990s. Photographs by Rong Rong and Xing Danwen offered documentation of provocative and groundbreaking pieces performed by artists such as Zhang Huan and Ma Liuming by integrating disparate art practices within their frames.¹ Around the country, a significant number of photographers began to stage actions for the camera, very often taking up the roles of both directors and actors. This practice can be followed in the work of Hong Hao, Zhao Bandi and Cang Xin. Their actions were staged in a variety of visual tropes, including those of advertising and popular culture, in order to comment on and offer a critique of China's globalised socio-political, cultural and economic present. Placing the actions in highly evocative urban settings was a legacy of such thinking about photography and was first apparent in the works by Weng Fen, Rong Rong and Zhang Dali. The main subject of their preoccupation became a reflection on the overwhelming changes forced on daily life by rapid urban developments.

Embedded in an experience of the urban everyday, these practices can be understood as a repetition of commentary on a transitory experience of the 'ever-new' as essentially 'always the same' – a type of mythology of modernity noted by Walter Benjamin in his writings on metropolitan Paris.² They can also be seen as simultaneously appropriating the legacy of the New York art scene of the 1970s, which was concerned with a similar fluctuation of the urban everyday imposed by gentrification.³ Empowered by China's entry to the World Trade Organization in 2001 and the unlimited access to art education, globalised art circuits and new technology that it entailed, Chinese photographers of the following decade have

1 – For further discussion on the social and political implications of this practice, see Thomas J. Berghius, *Performance Art in China*, Hong Kong: Timezone 8 2006.

2 – Greame Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City*, Cambridge: Polity Press 1996, 108.

3 – Shunk-Kender's *Projects: Pier 18* (1971) can be considered a defining point of reference in this sense. Photographs documenting the projects were later printed in a catalogue published by Musée d'Art Moderne et d'Art Contemporain de Nice in 1992.

4 – Karen Smith notes how ‘the radical shift in the focus of the national agenda from politics to economics’ resulted from China’s accession to the World Trade Organization and that ‘it is impossible to ignore this fact in any discussion of art in China since 2000’. Karen Smith, *The Real Thing: Contemporary Art from China*, Liverpool: Tate Publishing 2007, 21.

5 – See Karen Smith, ‘Zero to Infinity: The Nascence of Photography in Contemporary Chinese Art of the 1990s’, in *The First Guangzhou Triennial: Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art (1990–2000)*, ed. Wu Hung et al., Chicago: Art Media Resources; Guangzhou: Guangdong Museum of Art 2002, 35–50.

changed their view of urban landscape, producing imagery that is freed of nostalgia, lament and historical burden.⁴ Developing at a speed similar to that of the country’s modernisation, photography as art practice travelled ‘from zero to infinity’ in a single decade, taking up a significant share of contemporary art production.⁵

Arriving at the new century, a number of ‘young artists’ such as Cao Fei, Li Wei and Chi Peng as well as established practitioners like Xing Danwen share a common interest in exploring the potential of the contemporary cityscape. Their approach to photography is characteristic not only of situating camera-specific performances and self-portraits within representations of global cities, but also by the manner in which a void cityscape is used as an active element in playful photographic projects that probe issues of identity and reality. This article explores such use of the cityscape in staged photography in China to situate its methodology as a critical art practice that reflects on the conditions of urban living and on the medium of photography.

Strategies of Staged Photography

In the *29 Levels of Freedom* series of 2003, Li Wei stages a performance above the cityscape of Beijing. Using a translucent support to enable him to take up particular poses, Li Wei suspends his body in the air to construct an illusion of flying in and out of the window of a high-rise apartment. Two photographs from the series titled *040-01* and *040-2* form a part of a sequential narrative, suggesting a fictional story (figure 1). The contrast between the mundane appearance of the action and the ‘stage’ itself produces the visual force of these images as the height of the location and the speed of the traffic on the motorway below are subverted and reappropriated. The angle of the camera simulates a snapshot, using reflection in the windows of the building to add another layer of contrast, turning the movements inside out and offering a reversed view of the scene.

In 2006, the same artist used a cityscape of Hong Kong as a backdrop for *Li Wei Falls to Hong Kong* (figure 2). The image is included in a series in which the artist repeats the same scenario of constructing an image of himself ‘falling’ against globally recognised sites such as Tiananmen Square in Beijing or Red Square in Moscow. The series can be interpreted as a comment on the speed of China’s contemporary modernisation as it shows the artist falling headfirst into the harbour from an unknown height. Wearing the same nondescript, everyday clothing as in the 2003 performance, the artist’s body appears stiffened in an upside-down position with his head submerged under the water. Again, a stark contrast is achieved in the position of the body against the high-rises in the background, while the image’s subversive power is communicated through their comical relation to one another.



Figure 1. Li Wei, *040-01*, *040-02*, *29 Levels of Freedom* series, 120 cm × 175 cm each, c-print, 2003. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 2. Li Wei, *Li Wei Falls to Hong Kong*, 176 cm × 541 cm, c-print, 2006. Courtesy of the artist.

Li Wei strategically composed this photograph so as to suggest the contradictory nature of the relationship between the body and the cityscape. This is achieved by positioning the body against the ‘verticality’ of the high-rises, in relation to which it is made vulnerable by the exaggerated artificiality of its pose. A number of links connect Li Wei’s approach to photography and Cao Fei’s 2004 video production *Cosplayers*. In still shots from the video, the cityscape of Guangzhou serves as a background to a fictional portrayal of youth identities, enacted by a number of costumed actors embodying their favourite animation characters (figures 3, 4).

Dress plays a significant role in the approach by both artists. In the case of Li Wei, it is the mundane and everyday garments that achieve a visual effect in the images, whereas for Cao Fei artificial and exaggerated costumes are used towards the same end. Like Li Wei, Cao Fei makes active use of a cityscape or ‘the visual appearance of the city’ to construct a fragile portrayal of youth fantasy.⁶ As much as it is the cityscape that provides the costumed characters with a space to perform, a ‘playground’ for the fantastic, it is also a site that renders them fragile, revealing the fantasy as escapist and utopian.

For Li Wei, the prevailing strategy remains comedy, whereas Cao Fei’s narration is based significantly on fantasy. ‘Theatricality’ and the ‘cinematic’ experience reveal

6 – A ‘cityscape’ is defined as ‘the visual appearance of a city or urban area; a city landscape; a picture of a city’. See J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner, *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford: Clarendon Press; Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press 1989.

Figure 3. Cao Fei, *Cosplayers*, video, 8 min, 2004. Courtesy of Vitamin Creative Space.



Figure 4. Cao Fei, *Cosplayers*, video, 8 min, 2004. Courtesy of Vitamin Creative Space.



the images to be detached from a relation to the 'real'. Karen Henry writes in this regard:

While theatrical tableaux have been a part of photographic practice from its inception, since the 1980s there has been a proliferation of artwork in which theatricality, and its particular relationship to the cinematic, has become both a strategy and, inherently, a subject of the work. The 'gesture that knows itself to be appearance' is a self-reflexive mirror that reveals the nature of contemporary representation.⁷

For Henry, social relevance is the measure of good work in staged photography and the means by which it transgresses its artificiality. As a method of practice, staged photography integrated with playful performance aims to subvert the medium's claims to veracity as a tool of social critique.⁸ In the case of these particular photographs, they perform in relation with a cityscape, maintaining a connotation of specific locality. It is essentially a 'Chinese' city that provides the *mise-en-scène* before which the meaning and social relevance of the performances are formulated.

As a 'visual appearance of a city' or a 'picture of a city', the cityscape becomes an active element in rendering the staged photographs identifiable. Like the directed performative action, the image of a cityscape is itself used as a construct, invested with both the historiography of universal metropolitan mythology and the potential to represent present-day globalised urban culture. The images that make use of the cityscape, in this sense, should not be considered simple 'compositions', understood as privileging parts over the whole, but as 'arrangements' in which elements of the image operate in relation to each other, much as in a photomontage.⁹ The choice of a particular stage, as well as of particular clothing and camera angles, are all assigned strategic value in the practice of staged photography.

In the images by Li Wei and Cao Fei, both aerial and ground level views offer urban landscapes composed primarily of high-rises. These can be understood as 'ruins in reverse', to cite a phrase coined by Robert Smithson to describe new urban developments in the process of being built as *rising* into ruins.¹⁰ Such a 'rise' of ruins was experienced as a creation of 'urban voids' in the rapid processes of urban development that followed immediately from China's determination to achieve economic prosperity.¹¹ However, it is the 'image' of a 'finished' urban landscape,

7 – Karen Henry, 'The Artful Disposition: Theatricality, Cinema and the Social Context in contemporary photography', in *Acting the Part: Photography as Theatre*, ed. Lori Pauli, London: Merrel 2006, 136.

8 – A parallel to such artistic strategy can be drawn with what Martha Rosler describes as 'quotational irony'. See Martha Rosler, 'In, Around and Afterthoughts (on Documentary Photography)', in *Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings, 1975–2001*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2004, 151–207.

9 – On the distinction between 'compositions' and 'arrangements', see Greg Foster-Rice and John Rohrbach, *Reframing the New Topographics*, Chicago: Center for American Places at Columbia College Chicago and University of Chicago Press 2010, 65. David Graver defines montage as an image in which 'the individual elements participate in a project that is greater than themselves'. David Graver, *The Aesthetics of Disturbance: Anti-art and Avant-garde Drama*, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press 1995, 33.

10 – Robert Smithson, 'A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey', in Robert Smithson and Jack D. Flam, *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1996, 72.

11 – Hou Hanru, 'Filling the Urban Void: Urban Explosion and Art Intervention in Chinese Cities', in *On the Mid-Ground*, ed. Yu Hsiao-hwei, Hong Kong: Timezone 8 2002, 176–91.

rather than the sites of redevelopment themselves, that is utilised by both artists, adding to the artificiality of the final scene and thus moving away from their consequential impact on the particular locality.

A better understanding of these practices becomes necessary if the nature of the 'Chinese' city that these cityscapes ostensibly represent is understood as immanently and irreversibly connected to the processes of globalisation. As the high-rises forming the image of a cityscape can be seen to signify symbolically China's rapid ascent to economic superpower, they can also be understood to carry an implied meaning and importance outside their specific locality. Such implied significance of the changing Chinese cityscape can be better situated and further elaborated through the notion of belonging, reflecting Saskia Sassen's frequently asked question: 'Whose city is it?'¹² For Sassen, understanding of new, global cities, especially in Asia, should not be confused with our previous understanding of metropolitan centres such as Paris or New York. Sassen deploys a notion of 'cityness' to address a possibility that 'there are kinds of urbanity that do not fit with this large body of urbanism developed in the West' and as an instrument to capture the inability of language to articulate such differences.¹³ The 'cityness' represented in the photographic practices discussed, under such terms, can be viewed as invested with the inability to articulate rapid processes of change in the real time of their unravelling, but are not necessarily particular to their immediate contextualisation in China.

In the 2000s, following Saskia Sassen's description of the relation between the cityscape and globalisation, the view of high rises used in the photographs by Chinese photographers as 'ruins in reverse' does not suffice. With regard to Smithson's writings, it appears that a more appropriate term to describe the function of urban landscape in such photographs is 'non-site'. For the purposes of his own work in the 1960s, Smithson coined the term 'non-site' to reflect on the possibility that an artefact exhibited in an art context can conjure up a site situated elsewhere.¹⁴ A non-site is 'a three dimensional logical picture that is *abstract*, yet it represents an actual site'.¹⁵ In this sense, the cityscape represented in staged photographs by Li Wei and Cao Fei conveys a similar 'abstract' potential to perform its relevance outside of a specific locality.

The urgency for recognising the potential of Chinese contemporary art under such terms has been noted in the writing and practice of Hou Hanru, who has claimed that from the 1990s 'Chinese art was not only that which belonged to the Chinese, but was also something that included what was happening in the West. Therefore, it was also a part of Western cultural identity'.¹⁶ Hou Hanru follows Arjun Appadurai's analysis of global currents and agrees with Saskia Sassen that a study of cities offers a means to address the most pressing and relevant issues globalisation entails.¹⁷ Unlike the understanding of globalisation as a one-way process, usually interpreted as 'westernisation', this view implies that globalisation involves a complex time-space reorganisation, resulting in an understanding of the world as 'a dislocated cultural space' that does not have a single centre but a plurality of centres.¹⁸ Extended to the study of cities, this view implies that the old model of a 'metropolis', as a 'mother city' and essentially a centre of power extending to its colonies, can no longer prevail and that we are witnessing the 'institution of a new paradigm whose character needs to be addressed'.¹⁹

As 'non-sites' of the globalised 2000s, the cityscapes of Chinese contemporary staged photography can be understood as visualising relations towards contemporary urban living detached from its firm connection to locality. In other words, a *détournement* from a reading that favours situating a cityscape in local societal structures offers itself if we, following Douglas Crimp, ask 'could this city be ours'?²⁰

12 – Saskia Sassen, 'Whose City is It? Globalization and the Formation of New Claims', *Public Culture*, 8:2 (Winter 1996), 206.

13 – Saskia Sassen, 'Cityness in the Urban Age', *Urban Age Bulletin 2* (Autumn 2005), 1.

14 – Lynne Cooke, 'From Site to Non-site: An Introduction to *Mixed Use, Manhattan*', in *Mixed Use Manhattan: Photography and Related Practices, 1970s to the Present*, ed. Lynne Cooke and Douglas Crimp, Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2010, 41.

15 – Robert Smithson, 'Untitled (Site Data)', in Smithson and Flam, *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, 364.

16 – Yu Hsiao-hwei, 'Interview with Hou Hanru: In the Guise of an Introduction', in *On the Mid-Ground*, ed. Yu, 14.

17 – *Ibid.*, 13–18.

18 – Jonathan Xavier Inda and Renato Rosaldo, *The Anthropology of Globalization: A Reader*, Malden, MA: Blackwell 2002, 26.

19 – Giorgio Agamben, 'Metropolis', 17 March 2007, English translation from audio files by Arianna Bove, available at the European Graduate School web portal, <http://egs.edu>, accessed 25 February 2013.

20 – *Mixed Use Manhattan*, ed. Cooke and Crimp, 60.

The (Global) City Vanishes

The same methodology – a staging of a playful fictional action contextualised in relation to an elusive cityscape – can be recognised in Chi Peng's *Sprinting Forward* from 2004 (figure 5). This photograph is also part of a larger series in which the body of the artist himself is placed within key locations around Beijing, and integrated with the city.²¹ The photograph shows a number of nude male figures seen from behind running together with numerous red planes, which match the train seen passing alongside. As the planes are passenger aircraft, the photograph can be read against the anticipated Beijing Capital airport extension planned at the time to accommodate the 2008 Olympics. Executed as the largest building site in the world, Terminal 3 of the airport was connected with the city centre by a direct train line, suggesting an interpretation of the image as a reflection of the way in which the project would speed up access to the city. However, the nudity of the figures and the combined action of running and flying suggest a broader scope of interpretations that emphasise the city's loss of a specific locality, at least to an eye unfamiliar with the city of Beijing. The only stable reference in the image is that of speed, of 'sprinting forward' by the human figures, as well as the train and the airplanes, scaled down digitally to fit the picture plane.

For Paul Virilio, writing on the 'overexposed' condition of global cities, international airports contribute as points of access to the way in which 'technological time-space' becomes a new model of their representation while 'speed becomes a primal dimension that defies all temporal and physical measurements'.²² In Chi Peng's image, the digitally manipulated photograph offers a space to relate to the technological condition of global cities as an immanent characteristic intrinsic to their 'visual appearance'.

In a later 2006 series, digital manipulation is used to elaborate the character of global cities. *Day After Tomorrow* (figure 6) once again includes a number of nude figures seen from behind, multiplied self-images of the artist, on this occasion flying over a cityscape. As a composite of landmark buildings in New York, Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen and Hong Kong, the represented city itself becomes fictional. The air is still a point of entry to this city, but flying is now attributed to humans in an implied transcendence of temporal and spatial boundaries by the use of modern

21 – According to Christoph Noe, Xenia Piech and Cordelia Steiner, 'anyone familiar with Beijing would recognize the locations'. *Young Chinese Artists: The Next Generation*, ed. Christoph Noe, Xenia Piech and Cordelia Steiner, Berlin and London: Prestel 2008, 77.

22 – Paul Virilio, 'The Overexposed City', in *The Lost Dimension*, trans. Daniel Moshenberg, New York: Semiotext(e) 1991, 13–18.

Figure 5. Chi Peng, *Sprinting Forward-2*, 120 cm × 152 cm, c-print, 2004. Courtesy of the artist.

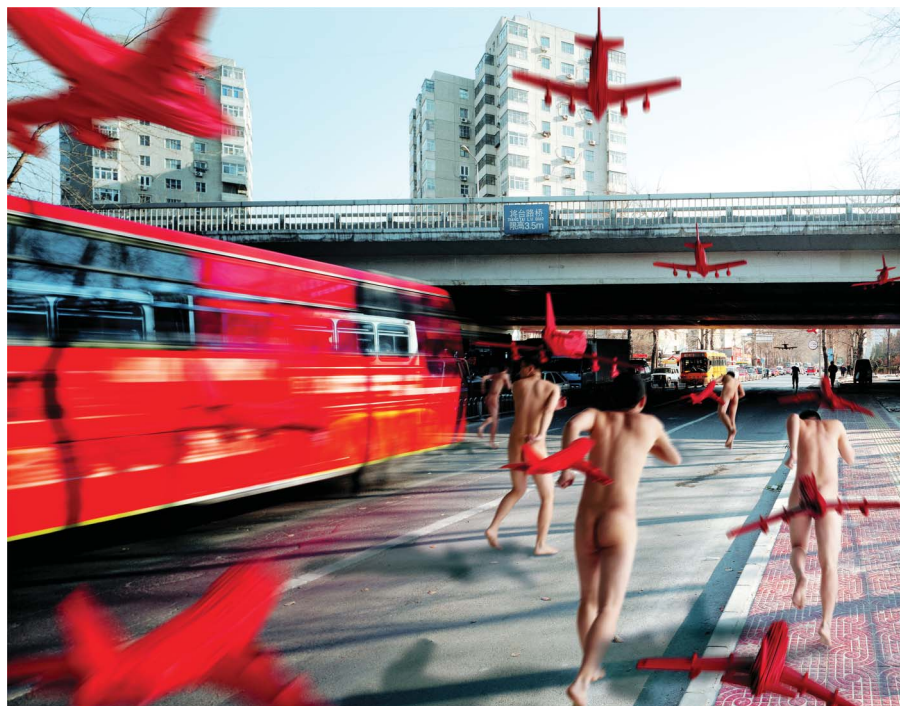




Figure 6. Chi Peng, *Day After Tomorrow*, 120 cm × 152 cm, c-print, 2006. Courtesy of the artist.

technology. As such, the image not only portrays a connection between individuality and urbanity but completely obliterates specific locality. The photographic image of the city becomes not only a ‘non-site’, but a representation of what Virilio terms a ‘place of the no-place’ of teleaction that is no longer the same as the here and now of immediate action’, devoid of any specific time–space.²³

For Virilio, the dislocation of ‘actuality’ by contemporary information technologies produces a ‘no-place’ detached from any specific temporality or locality. The technological infrastructure of global urban centres situates them in an informational network rather than in a specific location. The implications of this situation suggest an understanding of the cityscape not as a site for fixing individuality in a specific location but as a ‘no-place’, integrated into the circuits of information flow. As Virilio argues:

We are heading towards a situation in which every city will be in the same place – in time. There will be a kind of coexistence, and probably a peaceful one, between these cities which have kept their distance in space, but which will be telescoped in time. When we can go to the antipodes in a second or a minute, what will remain of the city?²⁴

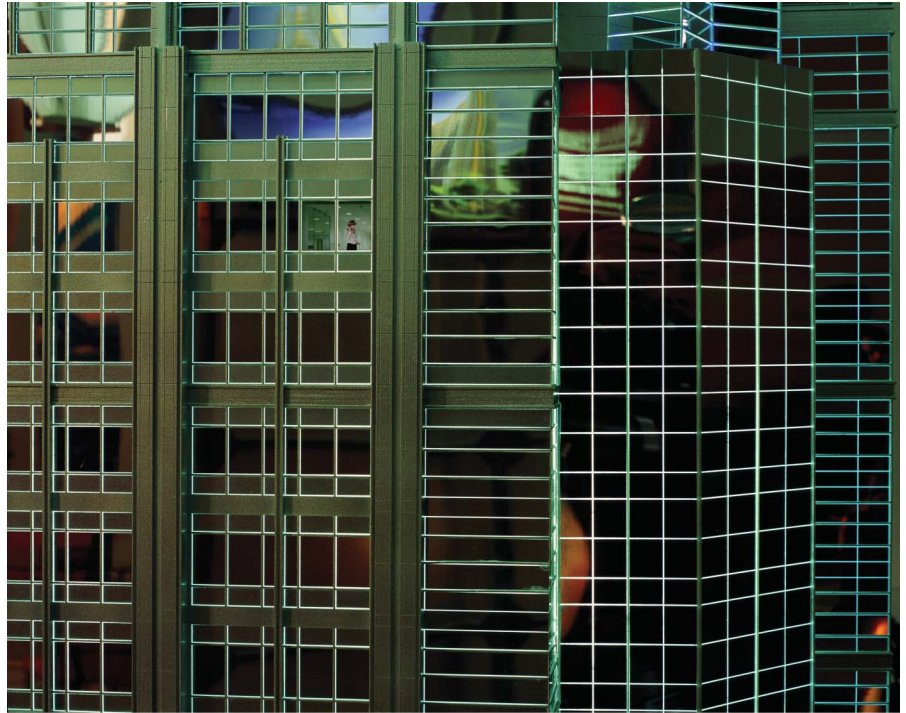
With regard to Chi Peng’s work, Virilio’s text assumes a prophetic tone, as the questions of ‘here’ and ‘there’ in his image disappear and are transgressed by the flying figures. *Day After Tomorrow* becomes a conglomerate of different localities that points at the ‘cityness’ of global urban centres, and generates a view of futuristic humanity. The image questions the identity not only of the ‘subject’ that adopts a position at centre-stage, but also of the stage itself.

The issue of the specific identity of a cityscape is also evident in Xing Danwen’s 2004 *Urban Fiction* series, in which the same methodology as that in the work by Li Wei, Chi Peng and Cao Fei – the enactment of a fictional narrative, again by the artist herself, placed within an indefinable cityscape – is highlighted by the fact that the urban scenes are constructed miniatures, photographed and merged with staged performances. In *Image 7* from the series (figure 7), the use of translucent colours suggests a technological rather than an architectural construction of the cityscape space within which the performative action is situated. Within Xing Danwen’s practice, the question of time–space and the identity of the global city are explored by the complete disappearance of the cityscape in its classical sense, and its

23 – Paul Virilio, *Open Sky*, trans. Julie Rose, London and New York: Verso 1997, 17.

24 – Paul Virilio and Sylvère Lotringer, *Pure War*, trans. Mark Polizotti, New York: Semiotext(e) 1983, 64.

Figure 7. Xing Danwen, *Image 7*, *Urban Fiction* series, 213.7 cm × 170 cm, c-print, 2004. Courtesy of the artist.

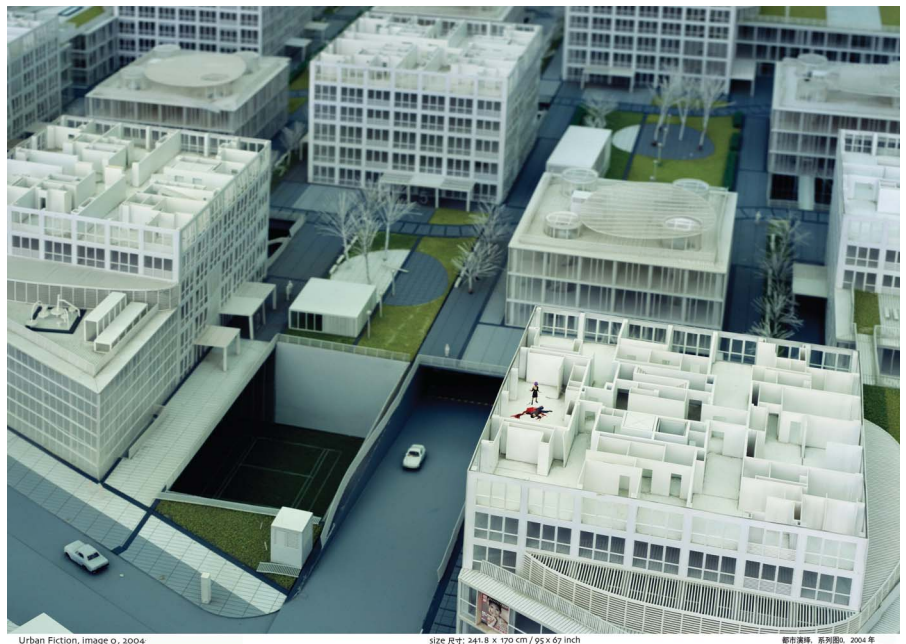


replacement with a miniature replica. The digital photograph becomes a model representation divorced from any referent in the real world. Again, such concerns resonate strongly with Virilio's writings in which disappearance is a direct consequence of technologised culture.

Other images in the series make use of varied perspectives to intensify the deterritorialised character of the cityscape. In *Image 0*, an aerial shot offers a view of a city block rendered in white – a blank, urban canvas that invites an unlimited number of projections (figure 8). The 'appearance of a *stable* image', in Virilio's words, is replaced by the 'disappearance of an *unstable* image' that marks a mutated representation infected by 'technologically generated perception'.²⁵ Following

25 – Ibid., 25; John Armitage and Mike Featherstone, *Paul Virilio: From Modernism to Hypermodernism and Beyond*, London: SAGE 2000, 5–6.

Figure 8. Xing Danwen, *Image 0*, *Urban Fiction* series, 241.8 cm × 170 cm, c-print, 2004. Courtesy of the artist.



Urban Fiction, image 0, 2004

size 尺寸: 241.8 x 170 cm / 95 x 67 inch

都市虚构, 系列图0, 2004年

Virilio, it is not the relation between photography and the real that is highlighted in such practice but the accelerated waning of reality itself.

Xing Danwen also makes use of clothing to construct a variety of roles played out by the artist in details of the images, which are merged digitally within the constructed cityscapes. In *Image 7* an office worker talking on a telephone stands by a window, while *Image 0* depicts a murder scene on a rooftop with the main protagonist frozen above a bleeding body. In both scenarios, the featured global cityscapes – ‘non-sites’ of ‘no-places’ resulting from the dislocation of globalised culture – are disconnected from a firm relationship to the real and replaced with digitally constructed substitutes. Such cityscapes reflect a view of globalisation as threatening and align with a nihilistic and apocalyptic view of possible future scenarios. Boris Groys describes the homogenisation of global urban centres and the disappearance of local identities, noting that ‘quite dissimilar cities begin to resemble one another, without any particular city serving as a prototypical model for all others’.²⁶ For Groys, however, such a condition is not only technologically determined but a consequence of processes of globalisation that have ‘replaced the future as the site of utopia’.²⁷

26 – Boris Groys, *Art Power*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2008, 105.

27 – Ibid.

The particular relation to the globally shared future becomes the main signification for all the cityscapes examined in this essay, as it is primarily that image which escapes fixing and projecting, undermining the stability of all elements in these staged photographs. John Rajchman also considers the ‘vanishing’ of stable images of cities as primarily associated with a destabilisation of fixed identity. When the future and the city lose a stable identity, Rajchman argues, ‘the future then becomes “invisible” in a particular sense: its “image” no longer stands in any representational relation with the real cities from which it derives; it has a problematizing rather than an idealizing relation with them’.²⁸ The problematisation of cityscape, or of our understanding and representation of our present global condition of urban living, is intrinsic to its seeming ‘disappearance’.

28 – John Rajchman, *Constructions*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1998, 111.

Conclusion

In Alfred Hitchcock’s 1938 film *The Lady Vanishes*, a passenger on a train journey seemingly disappears, only to be rediscovered as something other than what she was previously thought to be. Such vanishing can be understood as a potential site for reinvestment and reinterpretation. The ‘vanishing’ cityscape can be viewed as a means of collapsing the illusion of our capacity to capture and articulate the speed at which contemporary urban environments change in real time. The cityscape represented in the work of Li Wei, Cao Fei, Chi Peng and Xing Danwen not only dislocates the viewer from a fixed relation to his or her particular locality in space but also in time, and in so doing becomes a ‘future-image’ or a model representation of possible future scenarios.

The apparent ‘vanishing’ of the cityscape in Chinese staged photography in the past decade should be understood as an artistic tool applied in order to problematise or visualise some of the implications of the speed of urban and technological development, and its effects on the perception and experience of the everyday in globalised urban environments. Although the focus on the character of global cities as dislocated cultural centres offers a methodology that transcends understandings of art practices as local productions, the term ‘globalisation’ remains ubiquitous and is prone to misconception. The criticism of Chinese staged photography should therefore be understood as aimed both at local and global contextualisations of art production in the last decade.

Staged photography is by no means the only mode for approaching and practising the medium in China. The Shanghai-based photographic duo *Birdhead* (Ji Weiyu and Song Tao) demonstrates a different vision of city life based on monochrome snapshot aesthetics. In addition, the scope and significance of Chinese art underwent similarly rapid transformations as Chinese photography. The ephemeral nature of urban life would not only be elaborated in performance art but also in varied modes

29 – In reverse, it would be the body that ‘vanishes’ in the practices by Qiu Zhijie and Liu Bolin.

30 – Chen Shaoxiong, ‘Why Do I Want to Photograph the Streets of Guangzhou’, in Wu Hung and Peggy Wang, *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, New York: Museum of Modern Art; Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2010, 218.

31 – François Laruelle, *The Concept of Non Photography*, trans. Robin Mackay, Falmouth: Urbanomic 2011, 20.

32 – Jacques Rancière, *Film Fables*, trans. Emiliano Battista, New York: Berg 2006, 158.

33 – Ibid.

34 – John Rajchman, ‘Foucault’s Art of Seeing’, *October*, 44 (Spring 1988), 95.

35 – Laruelle, *Concept of Non Photography*, 56.

of practice. Situated within such heterogeneous understandings of photography and a rich field of contemporary art production, the practices of staged photography distinguish themselves by exploring the possibilities of fiction as a model to problematise issues of urban living. As we have seen, it is not only the characters performing the staged actions that are directed toward the creation of fictional narratives but also the ‘stage’ itself – the cityscape used to enact their presence. Understood as ‘appearance’, the cityscape adds a spatial element to the image detached from the real.²⁹

As such, these practices push to the limits the methodology of staged photography in order to destabilise the fixed identities of the subjects and the spaces that they occupy. These practices highlight the inability of the camera to record the discrepancy between individual perception and the global circulation of movements and structures. As early as 1997, Chen Shaoxiong noted how the speed of urban change in China resisted processes of documenting and recording: ‘I feel that the speed at which I photograph the streets of Guangzhou will never catch up with the speed at which the streets of Guangzhou are changing’.³⁰ Thereafter, the ‘vanishing’ cityscape in staged photography shifted from the tension between the local and the global towards the individual experience of global urban culture. However, it is not only the elements of an image that were problematised and seemingly made fictional, but the practice of photography itself. Destabilised from its relation to the real, photography is used as an art practice that renders the fiction even more apparent. As the fictional identities are placed in abstract ‘non-sites’, these works are revealed by the exploration of practice as ‘non-photography’, reflecting on what François Laruelle has recently termed ‘the unlimited space of fiction that is the finished photo’.³¹ For Jacques Rancière, ‘fiction means using the means of art to construct a “system” of represented actions, assembled forms, and internally coherent signs’.³² In his writings on the difference between ‘fictional’ and ‘documentary’ film, Rancière has underlined how they differ in their treatment of the real – as ‘an effect to be produced’ or ‘a fact to be understood’.³³ Michel Foucault’s historical project, also described by the author as fictional, is a model for such understanding of lens-based media as sharing the aim with fiction ‘of showing how things might be otherwise, beyond our self-evidences’.³⁴

Staged Chinese photography, as a construction of a fictional ‘system’ of signs primarily aimed to emphasise the unstable character and experience of global urban spaces, also offers a means to rethink the properties of the medium as ‘non-photography’. Producing an effect of a ‘future-image’, the contemporary works examined in this essay open a space for a reassessment of photography’s critical potential as an art practice. As Laruelle claims photography not as a space of representation but as fictional mediation, the question of key importance becomes ‘what can an image do, what is it that can be done in an image?’³⁵