

From Six Mile Village to Three Shadows Studio

Wu Hung

A few years ago when I began writing *Rong Rong's East Village*,¹ I wanted to discuss three things. While each of the three had its own distinct scope and theme, all were inseparable from understanding contemporary experimental art in China and the artists who practiced it. The first task was to interpret specific works of art, particularly to unearth the most interesting ones and explore their depths, as this is the basis of understanding any art or artist. The second task was to document and restore the artists' living and working environment at that time, mainly by consolidating fragmentary information of their lived experience, emotion, and desire into a coherent picture. The third was to place these works and artists into the larger framework of contemporary Chinese urban, social, and cultural space. What was Rong Rong's East Village? Why did he gather with other artists from far-flung reaches of the country in this small village on the periphery of Beijing, filled with garbage and industrial waste? What connection did they have to this place? What would be the fate of the East Village? Why did it disappear without a trace, leaving not even a broken brick or shattered tile to mark its presence? When I looked at the pictures of Rong Rong's East Village and asked these questions, I hoped to understand—and indeed did gradually come to understand—not only the artistic nature of each photograph and the life experience of the photographer who made them, but also the fate of a city, the intimacy and struggle with which people inhabit their environments, and the uncontrollable tragedy of history.

Photographs of Liulitun (literally, Six Mile Village) by Rong Rong and inri might be considered a continuation of *Rong Rong's East Village*. The earliest works here were created shortly after the East Village artist community was disbanded, and Rong Rong moved to the nearby village of Liulitun in 1995. Writing this brief essay, I am still thinking of the three perspectives mentioned above: artworks, the artist, the city. As time

passes by, Liulitun leads us step-by-step through the last years of the twentieth century, and on into the twenty-first. We see how Rong Rong's lens and life gradually evolve, and how Beijing's merciless expansion—that massive wheel of destruction and reconstruction—keeps on turning. At the dawn of the century, a Japanese girl who speaks with her eyes enters into this strange, small courtyard; she is Inri. From this point on, she and Rong Rong and Liulitun find meaning in a soundless dialogue. Two years later, the wheel of destruction encroaches, finally crushing Liulitun. When their courtyard was turned into a pile of bricks, Rong Rong and Inri held a private funeral atop the ruins, holding fresh white flowers in their hands.

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I first met Rong Rong in Liulitun. It was the summer of 1997, when I was preparing the exhibition *Transience: Experimental Chinese Art at the End of the 20th Century*.ⁱⁱ One major goal of this exhibition was to shift the focus of the introductory research then being done on Chinese contemporary art from collectivity to individuality. As I saw it, this transition was of utmost importance for the exhibitions of this art then being mounted abroad, because for most foreign critics and viewers at that time, Chinese contemporary art, regardless of whether it was called “avant-garde,” “experimental,” “unofficial,” or “underground,” was unfailingly seen as a collective political behavior, meaningless outside the context of the post-Cultural Revolution political environment inside China or the post-Cold War international situation. *Transience* sought rather to portray Chinese contemporary art as a collection of individual artistic voices. This individuality, of course, was not isolated or absolute, because these artists did indeed face similar political, social, and artistic questions. But they were “experimental artists” precisely because each one reacted differently to a set of common questions and problems, resulting in creation and innovation in terms of form, style, and visual language. This idea of individuality became the center of the exhibition and the theme of its catalogue. For the catalogue, I wrote twenty-two short essays exploring the work of individual artists; the material for these

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articles came from my interviews with the artists as well as their notes, writings, plans, and drawings. I did some of these interviews at the Overseas Chinese Hotel (the place where I most liked to stay when I came back to China in those years), but I also felt it important to see the artists in the spaces where they lived and worked. And that is why I went to visit Rong Rong in Liulitun.

Even after many years, I remember that visit like it was yesterday. Rong Rong described to me the rough location of Liulitun over the phone, outside the Third Ring Road, close to the Fourth Ring then under construction. He would wait for me by the roadside. With this in mind I hired a cab and had it drive straight east along Agricultural Exhibition Center South Road. The road was newly constructed: flat, broad, empty. The cab passed the Second Ring, then the Third, as the tall buildings grew scarcer. Workers were erecting traffic lights and electric poles along the street; sluggish pedestrians waddled across. The cab suddenly stopped in the middle of the road, when the driver turned around and said, “No way to go on, no more road.” I got out and looked around, and indeed things were as he said. The road ended under my feet, the pavement stopped, in front of me only bright green cropland. For just an instant I forgot where I was: I have never had another experience like this—no matter what the road, it always leads somewhere. There are no roads to nowhere. I felt absentminded, as if in a dream I had wandered to the edge of the world, where going one step forward would mean falling off a cliff. Snapping out of it, I asked the driver to turn the car around and drive slowly back. Less than a hundred meters back, Rong Rong was standing by the side of the road, his long hair blowing in the wind. I mumbled to myself, “Liulitun, the end of Beijing, the end of the world.”

This feeling of being at the end of the world grew deeper as the afternoon went on. Rong Rong led me off the empty road, down a bumpy dirt road into a little village, and finally to his small courtyard. In those five minutes I was taken back to days twenty or thirty years before, back into the recesses of my familiar, endless, eternally recurring past. No one knows how old this past is: humble brick and tile homes, faded latticework, deep shadows under overhanging eaves, the rising and falling chirp of cicadas at high noon. It

is as if these have always been and always will be. But in 1997, this feeling of safety and permanence was but an illusion. As soon as I saw Rong Rong's work, I immediately realized that for him, the quiet laziness and exhaustion of Liulitun were full of crisis. Yet like the eye of a storm, the tranquility at the heart of this crisis had made the artist's nerves all the more sensitive, observing every drop of the present amidst this anxious state of waiting, listening in silence to the clamor moving in from afar. Thus this feeling of timelessness, this state of meaninglessness—the humble homes and faded latticework, the eaves and their shadows, the chirping noontime cicadas—was endowed with a biting sense of time, a special significance.

That day Rong Rong showed me his series *Untitled*, which I have since referred to as “ruin pictures.” This name has several meanings for me. On one level, “ruin pictures” expresses the ascendance and scale of demolition in Beijing. In these pictures, tiled buildings and courtyard dwellings have been transformed into desolate, dilapidated piles. The former occupants have moved on, and the images retain the tranquility of a cemetery. But on another level, these photographs also represent “ruined image”: the central image in each picture is a leftover poster amidst the rubble, often faded portraits of glamorous movie stars. Another related group of works frees the theme of ruin images from the realities of architecture altogether: these are images displayed in public settings, faded and damaged by the bright sun. I have already written of these works in articles and books, but here I would like to add one more point: these works marked the beginning of Rong Rong's “Liulitun Moment.” They are photos about the fate of buildings like the then still-undemolished one in which he lived, and about the fundamental fragility of the image itself. Unlike the collective nature of the “East Village Moment,” this “Liulitun Moment” belonged to an independent artist. For Rong Rong, this independence is reflected in meditations about death, tragedy, and limitation.

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I would visit Liulitun many more times, going to see Rong Rong's new work and

that of the other artists living in that courtyard. Although at times one could still feel the echoes of the earlier East Village—gatherings of friends eating and drinking together, debating the world, the occasional performance by one artist or another—still the atmosphere of that courtyard grew ever quieter and more closed. Little by little it became the living and working space of a single artist, filled with the secrets and ambiguities of a private life. The ivy on the gate grew thicker, the sounds of cars and people outside seemed to grow more and more remote. “Ruins” remained a theme in Rong Rong’s photography, but each new work grew in refinement and size, as their content likewise grew more romantic and theatrical. He had always liked to photograph himself, and was now filling the twin roles of director and actor. Some of these new photographs were hand colored, bearing traces of their author’s participation in the post-production process. These changes resulted in the series *Wedding Veil* and *Ghost Village*.

These are two exceptionally beautiful series, which portray decay and melancholy through images of a young man and woman wandering atop ruins, like songs without words. I can pick Rong Rong out of every image, whether he is naked or dressed in the bright cloak of a woman. But I had never met the girl who appeared with him, and so she has remained for me an abstract symbol, a ghost-like image existing only in the photographs. This image became real only at the moment when inri appeared. Then I understood. The melancholy that came before, the hesitation amidst the ruins—all were but expressions of Rong Rong’s expectation.

Perhaps that was in 2000, when we—my wife Judith, my daughter Lida, and I—became Rong Rong and inri’s friends. It was all so natural. She appeared in that courtyard in Liulitun, bearing the lightest tea on a small tray, smiling. “Tea,” she said (in her newly acquired Chinese). Then, turning to face the lazy cat roaming the courtyard, she smiled and said, “Cat.” But the pictures she made while in Tokyo allowed me to know the pre-Liulitun inri. That was a time of colorless pupils and convulsing bodies staring out of black-and-white photographs, a brilliant feminine face struggling toward collapse, shadowy urban spectacles of Tokyo emerging under streetlamps. There was no substance or weight, just the anticipation and anxiety before the climax and the

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weightlessness and collapse that followed.

These works are utterly different from the photographs she produced while living in Liulitun. The latter consist of innumerable fragments of daily life and piecemeal emotion, presented openly for the first time as galley proofs in an exhibition in New York's Chamber Fine Arts in 2006.ⁱⁱⁱ The vertical and horizontal rows of images have not been cut or edited. There is no spatial coherence or sequential narrative; the only constant is the eye behind the camera, that of inri, curiously observing the extent of her surroundings, and focusing mostly on Rong Rong, his eyes, his camera. I can understand why inri has not made these proofs into individual artworks, placing them into exquisite frames: these fragments are just her life, a life she had never before experienced and will never again experience.

These photographs also make me understand more deeply the last series of works in that exhibition: when their courtyard was razed to the ground along with all of Liulitun in 2002, Rong Rong and inri held a funeral for this place and a farewell to the "Liulitun Moment" in their own lives. This moment began when Rong Rong discovered "ruins" and ended with his encounter and union with inri. Once Liulitun had disappeared, they left this place that would never again exist, moving into a world without end. A batch of works reflecting youth and full of desire for beauty had been produced, marking a new transcendence. In my imagination, this transcendence is like that of the spring cicadas climbing arduously out of the ground, bit by bit up the trunks of tall trees, shedding their shells, and finally flying off into the blue sky. For this reason, when I curated their two-person show in the Great Furnace Room of Beijing's Factory 798 in September 2003, I chose the name *Tui-transfiguration* as a poetic expression of this process of transcendence, and as a remembrance and recollection of their bygone days in the East Village, Tokyo, and Liulitun.

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I titled the last part of the *Tui-transfiguration* "Rebirth," and commented on it in

the exhibition catalogue: "A fascination with beauty and youth is the dominant theme of the third section of the exhibition, which feature two groups of collaborative works that Rong Rong and inri created after they had found each other and fallen in love. As if reborn from ruins, nature, still unspoiled, comes back to life. The two photographers embrace this amazing world. Harmony has triumphed, struggle has subsided. Sensual pleasure has returned to become the main purpose for artistic creation; even the frozen, frightening winter landscape of Mt. Fuji inspires joy."^{iv}

First seen in the tranquil photographic images that these two artists created together in 2001 and 2002, this rebirth finally materialized in their founding of Sanyingtang---the Three Shadows Studio (the formal name is the Three Shadows Photography Art Center) at Caochangdi on the east edge of Beijing. Solely funded by themselves, this 4,600 sq meters complex is an ambitious undertaking with facilities including two large exhibition halls, a conference room, a library, darkrooms, a café, and spaces for outdoor activities. Ai Weiwei's design further bestows the central building and surrounding yards with additional architectural significance. When the writer Sheila Melvin interviewed me in 2007 upon the Center's opening, I told her that these two artists "have done something quite important. There are so many museums and galleries sponsored by companies or governments, but I think this is the first sponsored by artists---and for idealistic reasons."^v About the first exhibition the Center organized, called *New Photo---Ten Years* and co-curated by Zhang Li and me, I told Melvin again: "I suggested this show because I felt they first should establish a historical perspective. I also feel that China moves so fast that the artists don't always think---they have instinct and ambition, but they need to think about what is Chinese contemporary photography."^{vi} Now in its second year, Sanyingtang has developed into a mature institution with a varied exhibition and education program, and has begun to attract wide attention internationally. This is not the only result of Rong Rong's and inri's rebirth, however: with the founding of the Sanyingtang they have also created a large body of photographs recording its emergence from Beijing's frozen earth, as well as the expansion of their family: since the Liulitun Moment they have given birth to two

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children and are awaiting the third.

(This essay is partially translated by Philip Tinari.)

- i Wu Hung, *East Village* (New York: Chambers Fine Art, 2003).
- ii This exhibition opened in Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, in February 1999.
- iii Entitled *Liulitun: RongRong and inri*, this exhibition was held in Chambers Fine Arts from October to December 2006 and was accomplished by a lavish catalogue of the same title,
- iv Wu Hung, *RongRong & inri: Tui-Transfiguration* (Beijing and Hong Kong: Timezone8, 2004), p. 188.
- v Sheila Melvin, "Photography as art comes into its own in China," *International Herald Tribune*, August 6, 2007.
- vi Ibid.