

## Rong Rong's *East Village*

Wu Hung

Located at Beijing's east fringe, between the Third and Fourth Ring Roads, was a small, tumbledown village called Dashanzhuang. Before it was finally demolished in 2001 and 2002 and assimilated into the ever-expanding Chinese capital, it consisted of some sixty to seventy farmhouses connected by narrow dirt roads. In its own history Dashanzhuang was utterly unimportant: not many native Beijingers knew this name even when the village still existed, and its eventual disappearance created no noticeable stir among local residents. But under a different name – the East Village (Dongcun) – the place is famous in an unofficial history: the history of contemporary Chinese experimental art. Between 1992 and 1994, a group of struggling artists and musicians moved in there. Attracted by the low-rents and close proximity to downtown Beijing, they made Dashanzhuang their foster home. Some of them further formed an avant-garde inner circle and began to create a series of highly challenging works – mainly performances and photographs – which sent an instant shockwave throughout the community of experimental Chinese artists in Beijing and beyond. Adopting the name of an alternative art space in New York, they renamed Dashanzhuang the East Village, and called themselves “East Village artists.” As a live-in artists' community, this Chinese “East Village” ceased to exist after June 1994, when the police arrested two of its members and forced the rest to leave their rented houses.

Now living in different places in Beijing, the East Village artists were nevertheless able to continue their working relationship and even expanded their circle. Some of the projects they carried out in early and mid-1995, such as *Primordial Sounds* and *To Add One Meter to an Anonymous Mountain*, have become classics in contemporary Chinese art. Such large-scale collaboration ceased after the summer of that year. Although individual artists in this group continued their experiments, these later projects owed less and less to their identity as “East Village artists.” An additional factor further eroded the relationship between these artists: after the East Village community became known to the international art circle through photographs, the authorship (and also the ownership) of these photographs became an issue of dispute among some of its members. Two questions lie at the heart of the dispute. First, do these photographs simply record the performances, or should they be considered the creative work of the photographers as well? Second, did the performances result from group participation or individual creativity? Intensified by desire for status and fame, different answers to these questions turned old friends and comrades into competitors and enemies.

This brief introduction provides a background to understanding Rong Rong's photographs collected in this album: these are both invaluable records of a crucial moment in the history of avant-garde Chinese art and important examples of contemporary Chinese photography created by an East Village artist. Their significance is actually threefold -- historical, artistic, and autobiographical; to read them purely as historical archive or personal expression inevitably restricts their meaning. In other words, what these photographs represent is Rong Rong's East Village, not a total and “objective” image of the artists' community. Accordingly, this essay aims to explore the historical, artistic, and autobiographical dimensions of these photographs. I will connect

their artistic innovations with the photographer's personal experience as an East Village artist, and I will also frame this experience in the general context of contemporary Chinese art. The story I am going to tell is therefore about subtle interactions between interior and exterior spaces – between an artist's inner world, including his dreams, vision, excitement, and anxiety, and a collective, retrospective history.

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Rong Rong arrived in Beijing in 1992 with wide-open eyes and a newly purchased camera. A farm boy from the southeastern province of Fujian, he had never left home before. He was skilled at working in the fields but had failed almost every course in elementary and junior high school except for studio art. This was followed by three unsuccessful attempts to enter a local art school (mainly because of his poor performance on exams in math and other general subjects). By chance he discovered photography and developed a passion for it. First he rented a double-lens Seagull camera to take his sisters' portraits and landscape shots. He then struck a bargain with his father, the manager of a local shop, to work as his employee for three years in exchange for the freedom to leave home and a sum of money to start his new life with. So this was how he got his own camera and went to Beijing in 1992, which by then had become a Mecca for young avant-garde artists throughout the country.

In Beijing, Rong Rong attended photography classes and soon became quite good at making the kind of arty, sentimental pictures favored by popular photo magazines. Some of his photos – portraits of his younger sister Yali in a desolate landscape – were published in these magazines. One of them even found its way to entering a National Photography Exhibition. But life was hard and the occasional public exposure of his pictures had little financial return. When his savings were gone he tried various odd jobs, including taking passport photos in a commercial studio. He changed addresses frequently, often guided by the cheapest housing on the market. In early 1993 he moved into Dashanzhuang -- later known as the East Village. The photographs Rong Rong made there constitute an important component of "East Village art." As mentioned earlier, these photos are valuable as records of various aspects of the East Village community – the artists and musicians, their physical environment, and especially their performances. On the other hand, these images exist in their own right as important works of contemporary Chinese photography. In particular, they signify the emergence of a new type of Chinese photography around the mid-1990s: no longer affiliating themselves with professional photography and its various institutions, a small group of photographers (including Rong Rong, Xing Danwen, Ai Weiwei, and Liu Zheng) allied themselves with avant-garde artists working in other mediums, deriving inspiration from and making crucial contributions to a burgeoning "experimental art" (*shiyan yishu*)<sup>i</sup> movement. As is well-known, this movement completely transformed contemporary Chinese art in the 1990s and made it a vital part of international contemporary art.<sup>ii</sup>

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To understand the significance of the East Village and Rong Rong's "East Village

photographs,” therefore, we must place the artists’ community and these images in the context of experimental Chinese art at the time. The development of this art in the early and mid-1990s, in turn, was intimately connected with China’s socioeconomic transformation during the two previous decades. As soon as the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, a new generation of Chinese leaders initiated a series of reforms to develop a market economy, a more resilient social system, and a new diplomatic policy that opened China to foreign investment and cultural influence. The consequence of this transformation was fully felt in the 1990s: major cities such as Beijing and Shanghai had been completely reshaped. Numerous private and joint-venture businesses, including private-owned commercial art galleries, had appeared. Educated young men and women moved from job to job in pursuing independent careers or personal well-being, and a large “floating population” entered metropolitan centers from the countryside to look for work and better living conditions.

Many changes in the world of Chinese experimental art were related to this larger picture. Two phenomena especially gave this world a different outlook in the 1990s. First, many experimental artists chose to become freelance, “independent artists” (*duli yishujia*) with no institutional affiliation. To be “independent” also meant to become “professional” – a move which changed not only these artists’ career paths but also their social status and self-perception. On the surface, freelance artists were free from institutional constraints. But in actuality, to support their livelihood and art experiments they had to submit themselves to other kinds of constraints and rules. It was in the 1990s that experimental Chinese artists learned how to negotiate with art dealers and western curators, and how to obtain funding from foreign foundations to finance their works. Quite a few of them developed a double persona, supporting their “unsalable” experiments with money earned from selling paintings and photographs.

Second, starting from the late 1980s and especially during the 1990s, a large number of experimental artists from the provinces to major cultural centers, especially the country’s capital Beijing. The result was a situation that differed markedly from the 1980s: in the ’85 Art New Wave – an avant-garde art movement in China that continued from 1985 to 1989 -- most experimental art clubs and societies emerged in the provinces and were active on the local level, while Beijing maintained its traditional position as the stronghold of official art and academic art. In the 1990s, however, Beijing drew young experimental artists from throughout the country. Local experimental communities of course still existed. But Beijing emerged above all these places to become the unquestionable center of experimental art, mainly because it constantly attracted talented young artists from all over the country. These immigrant artists, mostly in their twenties, emerged after the 1980s. To this new generation of experimental artists, the Cultural Revolution had become remote past, and their works mainly responded to China’s current transformation, not to history and memory. They found such stimuli in Beijing, the city most sensitive to social changes and political tensions in the 1990s.

A direct consequence of these two changes was the emergence of residential communities of experimental artists, known as “artists’ villages” (*huajia cun*). The first such community was located in Fuyuanmen village in Beijing’s western suburbs, near the ruins of the former imperial park Yuanmingyuan (and is therefore often called the “Yuanmingyuan artists’ village”).<sup>iii</sup> Avant-garde poets and painters began to live there as

early as the late 1980s; but it was not until 1991 that the place acquired a reputation as the home of an artists' community. It attracted media attention in 1992, as reports of its Bohemian residents stimulated much popular interest. Around the same time it was also "discovered" by art dealers and curators from Hong Kong and the West. The place established its reputation as the "window" on Chinese experimental art in 1993 and 1994, after the "cynical realist" painter Fan Lijun, who was then living there, appeared in three large international exhibitions, including the *China's New Art, Post-89* in Hong Kong, *Chinese Avant-Garde Art* in Berlin, and the 45th Venice Biennale.

In a broader sense, the artists' community at Yuanmingyuan introduced a particular lifestyle and set up a model for many later "villages," including the one centered in Songzhuang east of Beijing, which was founded by some of the Yuanmingyuan artists starting in the mid-1990s. Located in rural settings, these communities are also close enough to downtown Beijing to maintain close ties with the outside world. The initial reason for artists to move into such places is mainly economic: it is cheap to buy or rent houses there and to convert them into large studios and residences. But once a community has appeared it brings additional benefits to its members. First of all, it generates a sense of comradeship: the residents share an identity as independent artists, and some of them are close friends who have known one other for a long time. Living in close proximity promises convenience for socialization and occasions for entertainment. Visitors, including important foreign curators and art dealers, can see works of a dozen or so artists in one day. On the other hand, although artists in such a community are subject to mutual influence (especially by those "successful" styles and subjects), in most cases they do not form close groups based on common social or artistic causes. Such lack of shared commitment explains most communities' ambiguous artistic characteristics: while "villages" like those at Yuanmingyuan or Songzhuang can attract a large number of experimental artists to a single location, they do not necessarily inspire new ways of thinking and expression.

To this general situation the East Village was a noticeable exception: the group of immigrant artists who lived there between 1993 and 1994 did work together closely to initiate a new trend in experimental art. Also unlike the communities at Yuanmingyuan and Songzhuang, the East Village artists developed a much closer relationship to their environment -- a polluted place filled with garbage and industrial wastes -- as they considered their moving into this place an act of self-exile. Bitter and poor, they identified themselves with the place and derived inspiration from it: the works they created during this period were energized by a kind of intensely repressed desire absent in other artists' villages.

It is necessary to remember that although some of the East Village artists are now internationally renowned, they acquired their reputation only after their struggling days in the Village. This situation thus also differs from the artists' communities at Yuanmingyuan and Songzhuang, whose members differed from each other vastly in social and financial status. The most crucial significance of the East Village community, however, lies in its formation as a close alliance of performing artists and photographers, who inspired each other's work by serving as each other's models and audience. Viewed in the context of contemporary experimental Chinese art, this alliance initiated one of the most important developments in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when experimental artists working in different mediums increasingly envisioned and designed their works as performances, and when many of these artists were also

increasingly attracted by photography, not only deriving inspiration from it but also making photographs themselves.

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Looking back, Rong Rong can see that his life as an individual artist began in the East Village. His move there was coupled with his divorcing the kind of popular photographic style that had earned him a place in magazines and official exhibitions. Living in the Village, he became fascinated in exploring the secrets of its refuse-filled courtyards with his camera, his young face and bare torso occasionally reflected in broken windows in his pictures. As his friendship with other bohemian artists, musicians and writers in the Village deepened, he also began to photograph them: the rock poet-singer who called himself Curse (Zuzhou); the tough-faced performance artist Zhang Huan; the unfailingly sympathetic painter Little Duan (Duan Yingmei); the narcissistic cross-dresser Ma Liuming.

This was then followed by a burst of collective creativity in the Village that lasted about a month. Without much planning, a number of performance artists and photographers staged joint projects from mid-May to mid-June, 1994. The centerpieces were, among others, Ma Liuming's *Fen-Ma Liuming's Lunch*, and Zhang Huang's *12 Square Meters* and *65 Kilograms*. These performances became known to the outside through photographs made by Rong Rong, Xing Danwen, and Ai Weiwei, which appeared in the same year in an underground publication, an untitled volume known as *Heipi shu* or *Book with a Black Cover*.<sup>iv</sup>

This burst of creative energy was abruptly stopped by a heavy blow: after Ma Liuming's performance on June 13, 1994, the police arrested some members of the community for the performance's alleged obscenity, and also kicked out other Village artists, including Rong Rong, from their rented farmhouses. This event brought about some important changes in Rong Rong's photographs from the second half of 1994. First, his fascination with performance led him to develop various autobiographical modes. He returned to Fujian that fall, tracing his childhood memories with a new vision. Although he had always been interested in making self-portraits, from this point on he increasingly appeared before his camera, acting while recording his acts; the strong performance quality of these photos resonated with changes in his personal life.

Second, returning from Fujian to Beijing he began to develop a new relationship with former East Village performance artists, who had by now all left the Village and scattered in different villages on the east side of the city. He continued to photograph their group projects and individual performances. The former started from the *Primordial Sounds* in January 1995; the latter included Cang Xin's *Tramping Faces*, Zhang Huan's *Metal Case*, Ma Liuming's *Fen-Ma Liuming and Fish*, Zhu Ming's *Bubbles*, and a joint project by Zhang Huan and Ma Liuming called *The Third Contact*. In both types of activities he assumed a more active presence: he contributed a performance piece to the *Primordial Sounds*, and frequently initiated individual performance projects and photographed them. As the East Village gradually became history, toward the late 1990s his relationship with his former collaborators changed further. No longer a spontaneous participant in a performance project, he began to act more as an independent observer, recording while analyzing what he saw. (Sometimes

he provided the services of a professional photographer, working for a performance artist as a hired cameraman. Under such agreement he does not claim authorship for his photographs.) He also no longer limited his subjects to the East Village circle, but photographed performances by other experimental artists such as Song Dong, Yin Xiuzhen, Wang Jin, and Zhu Fadong.

Third, from 1996 onward Rong Rong increasingly focused on a new subject: the dramatic transformation of Beijing's cityscape. Starting from the series *Untitled*, he discovered a bond with half-demolished houses, which provided this rapidly developing city with a major visual spectacle.<sup>v</sup> His eyes were captured by the torn images of glamorous pin-ups left on the broken walls, whose visual power seems to have only been enhanced by their ruinous state. Going one step further, he staged performances inside half-demolished houses and photographed them. Looking through these pictures, one can see that despite their disparate subjects, they all utilize the master figure of *ruins*: whether a destroyed house or a piece of abandoned furniture, a torn poster or a cut-up film negative, the incompleteness of these images declares loss and propels the viewer to imagine the photographer's life and psyche.<sup>vi</sup> These "ruin pictures" belong to a new phase in Rong Rong's art after his East Village period ended.

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Images collected and reproduced in this album – both the individual plates and the pictures accompanying this essay -- constitute what Rong Rong calls his "East Village photographs." Although not all of these images were created when he lived in the East Village, to him all of them are intimately related to the Village or, more precisely, to his experience as an East Village artist. These photographs can be divided into three groups according to their subjects and dates of creation. The first group, taken from 1993 to June 1994, portrays the East Village artistic community in its physical context. The second group records continuing performances by East Village artists from late 1994 to 1997, after the community itself had been forced to disperse. The third group consists of Rong Rong's self-portraits taken both in his East Village days and afterwards. My discussion will follow the general chronology of these images (with selected examples running alongside the text) and contextualize them with information about the photographer and the East Village community. I will also weave Rong Rong's own words – diaries, letters, notes, memoirs – into my reading of the pictures: this combination of images, personal account, and historical analysis will construct a narrative pertaining both to the creativity of an individual artist and to the history of contemporary Chinese art.

<sup>i</sup> For the concept of "experimental art" in China, see Wu Hung, "Introduction: A Decade of Chinese Experimental Art (1990-2000)," in Wu Hung ed., *Reinterpretation: A Decade of Chinese Experimental Art (1990-2000)*. Guangzhou: Guangdong Museum of Art, 2002, 10-19, especially, 11-12.

<sup>ii</sup> For introductions to the development and various aspects of Chinese experimental art in the 1990s, see the essays collected in Wu Hung ed., *Reinterpretation: A Decade of Chinese Experimental Art (1990-2000)*, 10-138, 142-45, 252-55, 396-99.

- iii For a detailed and lively portrayal of artists in this community, see Wang Jifang, *Zuihou de langman – Beijing ziyou yishujia shenghuo shilu* (The last romantics – a factual record of lives of Beijing’s freelance artists). Harbin: Beifang wenyi chubanshe, 1999. 16-70. 汪继芳, 《最后的浪漫---北京自由艺术家生活实录》。哈尔滨：北方文艺出版社, 1999。16-70页。
- iv This volume was compiled by Ai Weiwei, Zeng Xiaojun and Xu Bing, and privately published in Beijing in 1994. Rong Rong’s photograph appears on p. 66.
- v For a close analysis of this series, see Wu Hung, *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century*. Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, 1999. 114-19.
- vi For an analysis of these later photos, see Wu Hung, "Ruins as Autobiography: Chinese Photographer Rong Rong," *Persimmon - Asian Literature, Arts, and Culture* vol. II, no. 3 (Winter 2002), 36-47.