



The Future Will Be the Past Memory and Nostalgia in the Work of Jeong Man Pan

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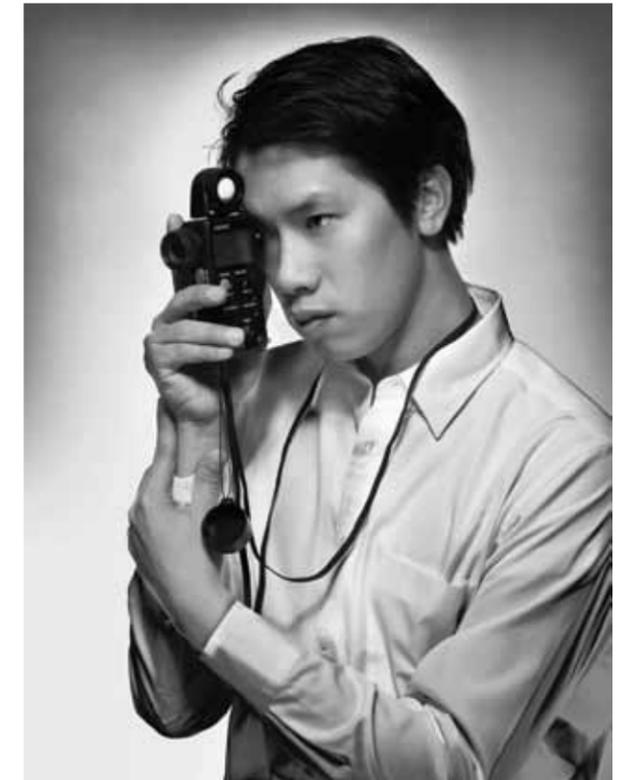
In China architecture is playing a leading role: on stage visions, dreams and sometimes nightmares of the planetary star system. As Cláudio Greco and Carlo Santoro refer: 'The glittering constellation of monumental icons singing the praises of the country's new power has come into existence as if by magic, with stadiums like intricate shells, towers with daring structures and airports of immeasurable size. With the curtain brought down on the Olympic and Expo 'theatres', beyond the terraces of the amazing stadiums and pavilions, glossy magazines continue to launch new meteors into the international firmament. Sifting through the incoherent metropolitan amalgam, fragments are sought for display in collections of auteur photographs. The frantic efforts of the critics to uncover the "genuine China" are rewarded by encouraging self-referential applause.'¹

Of the many conflicts that China faces in the future, I think the most serious one is the competition between objects, the ever-increasing number of man-made ones versus the more random dispersal of objects in nature. The wrong choice for China is to continue along the road of out-of-control industrial development. China needs to re-evaluate its value system, and consider that the quality of objects is more important than speed and quantity. It is impossible to believe that this current path will lead to a better future.² On close examination, however, the scraps collected have almost vanished, swallowed up by urban sprawl. Architecture assumes its real value only if it is recounted in a way that sets the dimension of living in the everyday. In the megalopolises of this vast country, another story is being told—a story of urbanisation with undefined boundaries, of indiscriminate replacement of historical fabrics. In fact, the predominant way of

Untitled, 68cm x 100cm.

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'doing architecture' is certainly not the one promoted by the scant group of erudite architects who attract the attention of the media. The increasingly efficient infrastructures with the fastest railroad lines on the planet are soon going to bring the megalopolises scattered over this immense country closer together; megalopolises where subway lines are being built at a dizzying pace, sacrificing some of the most precious memories.

According to the 2010 Census, there are over 160 cities in China with a population of over one million, and six cities up to 10 million. The challenges are significant and addressing them requires the capacity to plan, but also to envisage desirable and sustainable futures. By now between thirteen and fifteen million people move every year into the big cities or into areas that rapidly become immense metropolises. With the restructuring of the economic system employment in the public sector has been drastically reduced and the predominantly homogeneous social structure linked to this has changed rapidly. New social groups have emerged, partly as a result of the slackening of restrictions on mobility in the country: upper middle

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class/entrepreneurs, middle and lower middle class/employees in the private sector, workers in industry and the services/migrants from the countryside.

Macao is a city transformed into an urban field that displays freestanding, figurative, trophy-building-sculptures with a neglected, disorganised or damaged fabric. Among the typical symptoms for the city of imagery, are ill-conceived and/or unresolved public transportation systems, traffic congestion, lack of public spaces and pedestrian streets. Rather than try to make sense of Macao through the prism of photography, Jeong Man Pan's 楊文彬 work generates new knowledge and insight into Macao's current conditions, while asking: where are we going now?

... the new casino complexes must be regarded as a fundamentally authentic aspect of Macau's contemporary condition. In fact, given the cumulative impact of the artificial creation of the land, the artificial utopias of the casinos, and the artificial political status of the Special Administrative Region, one could argue that the authenticity of Macau lies precisely in its artificiality.³

Hans Ulrich Obrist⁴ says that compiling thoughts about the future is to take a snapshot of the contemporary moment. What will be the future in China? Yung Ho Chang⁵ argues: 'The China of the future will once again be a kingdom of Bicycles'. Daniel A. Bell⁶ says that: 'The future of China will be a return to the past. ... The return to the past will not necessarily look like the past', while with *Unfoldable Map* Jeong Man Pan seems to state that: 'The Future will be the Past'. In fact, the Western media often links the word 'future' to the word 'China', so often so that it seems urgent to ask people working in China today if, from the viewpoint of ancient Chinese philosophy, they see time as 'a conception of processes and unfoldings, of opportunity and duration, that doesn't allow itself to be filed under a common, global concept'. In the meanwhile what is happening to and in Macao matters, because this level of transformation has never been seen or attempted before. And while it has a kind of terrible beauty in its scale and scope, no one is quite sure how it will ultimately impact on the future of Macao citizens.

All photographers are somehow artists or see themselves as artists. The question is merely whether their concepts and ideas communicate with the concepts and ideas of contemporary art. Jeong Man Pan does

not see photography as a means of communicating the genius of autistic self-realisation but as the definition of marks along the way to try to understand the world, the city, the neighbourhood, the house. Its experimental interactions with Macao urban environment show the potential influence personal involvement can have in shaping the city, and may challenge fellow residents to participate.

'Unfoldable Map' explores the tension between public and private. In fact, Jeong Man Pan explores the intangible border where architecture stops and nothingness begins; he looks for a feeling of weightlessness, for buildings that seem to defy gravity. Rather than a static and massive architecture, Jeong wants to make his work as light as possible—he wants to make photographs that evoke the feeling of fragility and instability. He wants to be able to grasp the immaterial aspect of architecture. 'Unfoldable Map' searches the height, while it extends the 'urban' concept to the scale and scope of territory and landscape. With 'Unfoldable Map', Jeong Man Pan presents itself in favour of a practice that knows how to look back on history, without falling into the stylistic distortion generated by the new 'eclecticism' born in the eighties.

The central dimension of Jeong Man Pan's line of thinking is the body. Not the body as reference machine, but the body as a spatial component. For how is a space to be envisaged other than through its relationship with the body using it? So this involves taking the interactions between them into account, as well as the potential for action of each one, prior to any photograph. The area to be grasped is that of perception, as attested by a series of works which challenge and question memory, nostalgia,⁷ and visual and physical instability.

Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy. Nostalgic love can only survive in a long-distance relationship. A cinematic image of nostalgia is a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images—of home and abroad, of past and present, of dream and everyday life. The moment we try to force it into a single image, it breaks the frame or burns the surface.⁸

So what do we talk about when we talk about the 'Unfoldable Map'? We talk about a work that follows the tradition of critical reflection on the modern condition. We talk about a work that explores side

shadows and back alleys, rather than the straight road of progress; allowing us to take a detour from the deterministic narratives of history. With 'Unfoldable Map' Jeong Man Pan draws an exceptional promenade, acting as an agent of reform and creative dialectic. Jeong's project is subsumed by an exact idea. It begins with a whole that is independent and realistically conceived but which only finds its true form in the tension of direct contact with its environment. Thus, part of the importance of the work of Jeong Man Pan lies in the commitment established with the principle of diachronic continuity of the city shape.

A defining characteristic of skin is its ability to adapt. The skins of humans and animals grow hair, shed dead layers, change colour when exposed to the sun, wrinkle with age, and regenerate when injured. Plants respond similarly as seasons change. The skin of a building, too, can adapt. Jeong's work uses an enormous variety of building envelopes. Some of the buildings have soft, organic, and pliable layers that play well against the harder surfaces and urban context in which they are placed. Each opening between one building and the next has a different form and depth. Inverted spaces with varied functions (interiors, courtyards and entrance halls) are crossed and linked by streets and small paths.

Consciously distancing himself from many of the other 'typical' young generation photographers who are swallowed by a trend of noise making and media feeding, Jeong Man Pan remains detached in a time of

media frenzy and his focus is consistently positioned on the realization of urban visions and ideas. 'Unfoldable Map' refers to an idea that I would call architectural presence. Something that is of a solid nature, which builds itself around an interpretation of a daily ritual of life. Once again, if there is a development in this work, it is to do with memory, nostalgia, and visual and physical instability. 'Unfoldable Map' is grounded on the fact that both interior space and exterior volume have always been conceived of as an integrated idea.

Jeong's work questions one of the essential meanings of life: what is memory? How should memory relate to life? How should the city relate to memory? In 'Unfoldable Map', the memory detaches itself from the surface and penetrates the interior of the building material. It becomes a spatial element. With 'Unfoldable Map', Jeong Man Pan tries to save the conflict between the individuality of the object and the laws established in the construction of the city. Jeong's work spurs inquiry into how identity and surroundings are interlinked, in how identity and space are negotiated. With 'Unfoldable Map', Jeong Man Pan tries to figure out how to put the different components together: the sustainable idea of a person and his or her surroundings and the various notions of participation and the production of space. **RC**

Author's note: This essay was written on the occasion of the exhibition 'Unfoldable Map', which took place at Orient Foundation, from January to 16 February 2014, Macao.

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- 1 Cláudio Greco; Carlo Santoro. '2, (0), 1, 0... China'. *Lotus*, no. 141, March 2010 (Milan: Editoriale Lotus), pp. 8-18.
- 2 Wang Shu, in *The Future Will Be... China. Impromptu Thoughts about What's to Come*. Curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist, edited by Karen Marta, Philip Tinari (Beijing: Ullens Center for Contemporary Art / Pinacoteca Giovanni e Marella Agnelli), p. 195.
- 3 Thomas Daniell. 'Nothing Serious'. *Log*, no. 27, Winter/Spring 2013 (New York: Anyone Corporation), pp. 21-30.
- 4 Hans Ulrich Obrist (b. 1968 in Zurich) is a curator. He lives and works in London.
- 5 Yung Ho Chang (b. 1956 in Beijing) is an architect. He lives and works in Beijing and Cambridge, MA (US).
- 6 Daniel A. Bell (b. 1964 in Montreal) is a philosopher. He lives in Beijing and works in Beijing and Shanghai.
- 7 For a very interesting study of the sociology of nostalgia that examines nostalgia as a 'social emotion' and suggests the examination of three ascending orders of nostalgia, see Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* (New York: Free, 1979).
- 8 Svetlana Boym. 'Nostalgia and Its Discontents'. *The Hedgehog Review*, Vol. 9, no. 2, Summer 2007 (Virginia: Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture), p. 7.