

## 一、攝影、城市與超現實主義

攝影藝術出現以來，一直跟城市的發展扣上緊密的關係。在上一個世紀的二、三十年代，一批跟法國超現實主義運動過從甚密的攝影師，例如布拉賽（Brassaï, 1899-1984）、曼雷（Man Ray, 1890-1976）、安德烈·柯特茲（André Kertész, 1894-1985）、尤金·阿杰（Eugène Atget, 1857-1927）、葛曼·克羅（Germaine Krull, 1897-1985）、柏法（Jacques-André Boiffard, 1902-1961）、莫里斯·塔巴德（Maurice Tabard, 1897-1984）、李米勒（Lee Miller, 1907-1977）、羅傑·帕黎（Roger Parry, 1905-1977）與艾絲·賓（Ilse Bing, 1899-1998）等等，便花了不少菲林捕捉當時正處於新舊交替的巴黎。攝影藝術之所以跟城市的發展扣上關係，與當時大眾媒體以及印刷術的發達有關。面對高速的科技與都市發展，當時的報章雜誌花了不少篇幅記錄城市的現代化進程，而攝影往往在這些五花八門「城市故事」中，扮演着重要的角色。於是，我們會在當時的電影、新聞故事、明信片、出版物，甚至警察局紀錄、民俗誌與科學研究報告中，找到攝影的身影。例如，1928年由呂西安·沃格爾（Lucien Vogel, 1886-1954）所創立的左翼雜誌《看》（*Vu*），便通過大量的文本與攝影，紀錄了當時

大都會巴黎的城市景觀。當然，這一批攝影師也在當時的前衛藝術運動（超現實主義）中，扮演着重要的角色。換言之，這一批攝影師自由遊走於當時的大眾媒體與精緻藝術之間，得以在畫廊與報刊等不同場域，為當時的城市造像。<sup>1</sup>

# 香港攝影中的城市 與「超現實性」

小西

看着這一批攝影師的作品，我們往往會

感受到一份神秘詭異的氛圍。他們有能耐在城市的紀念建築、咖啡館、舞廳、街道、平民百姓等「既成物」（Found Objects），發現日常生活中異常複雜與充滿矛盾的視覺奇觀與「無意識的視覺」（Unconscious Optics）。<sup>2</sup>除了對於日常生活的觀察，他們還通過創新的燈光技巧與奇特的取鏡角度，為處於新舊交替的

1 Therese Lichtenstein, "The City in Twilight," *Twilight Visions: Surrealism and Paris* (University of California Press, 2009), pp. 15-20. 此外，攝影與現代化、印刷術以及城市發展之間的緊密關係，亦見於上一個世紀初的上海，詳情可參考李歐梵著，毛尖譯：《上海摩登：一種新都市文化在中國 1930-1945》，北京：北京大學出版社，2001年，頁 53-96。

2 「無意識的視覺」（Unconscious Optics）是德國大哲學家瓦爾特·本雅明（Walter Benjamin）所提出的概念。他在〈機械複製時代的藝術作品〉中指出：「毫無疑問，一個不同的自然衝照相機打開了自身，而這是肉眼無法捕獲的一這僅僅是因為人有意識去探索的空間為一個被無意識地穿透的空間所取代。即使人具有關於人如何走路的一般知識，也會對幾分之幾秒內人的步態姿式一無所知。伸手去拿一個打火機或一個湯匙的動作是人人都熟悉的機械動作，然而我們誰也不知道在手與器物之間真正發生的事情，更不用說這一切還怎樣隨我們的情緒狀態而變化。在此，攝影機藉助它上升或下降，插入或隔離，延伸或加速，放大或縮小等等機能而介入進來。攝影機把我們帶入無意識的視覺，猶如精神分析把我們領進無意識的衝動。」見本雅明著；漢娜·阿倫特編；張旭東、王斑譯：〈機械複製時代的藝術作品〉，《啓迪：本雅明文選》，香港：牛津大學出版社，1998年，頁 240-241。

大都會巴黎留下令人難忘的光影物質印記。<sup>3</sup> 要為這一種神秘詭異的氛圍找個具有代表性的例子，自然首選布拉賽的著名作品《聖母院下的巴黎》(*Paris from Notre Dame*, 1933)。在這一張照片中，樹立於巴黎聖母院屋頂的一樽客邁拉(Chimera)怪物神像(希臘神話中獅頭、羊身、蛇尾的吐火女怪)，正在神秘的俯視着陷於一遍光影網縷的巴黎都市夜景。巴黎聖母院於十二、三世紀間建成，座落於巴黎市中心西堤島(Île de la Cité)上，而原本樹立於巴黎聖母院屋頂的「夜行神龍」(Gargoyles)，除了有辟邪驅妖的作用，還替聖母院的屋頂疏導雨水。不過，布拉賽當時所見的客邁拉怪物神像，是巴黎聖母院十九世紀中復修時，才加進去的。跟原來的夜行神龍像相似，客邁拉怪物神像有一種介乎生物與死物、生與死的詭異氛圍。<sup>4</sup>

因此，在布拉賽的這一張照片中，我們看到的，是(仿似)中世紀怪物神像與現代都市璀璨燈光的神秘揉合。在一遍光影網縷的巴黎都市幻景(phantasmagoria)中，過去與現在彷彿相遇了，神秘，魔幻，令人嘖嘖稱奇。跟當時明信片、城市導遊書、遊覽書中的巴黎不同，在布拉賽的這一幅照片中，我們看不見十九世紀由喬治·歐仁·奧斯曼(Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann, 1809-1891)的「大巴黎計劃」所一手打造乾淨闊落的巴黎大道景象。我們看見的，是一個曖昧、不穩定與失序的巴黎，而這跟當時法國超現實主義運動的闖將們，通過不同媒介所企圖捕捉的都市奇觀與心象風景，可謂若合符節。<sup>5</sup>

正如已故的美國作家和評論家蘇珊·桑塔格(Susan Sontag, 1933-2004)所言，跟繪畫、詩歌等具有先天缺陷的藝術形式相比，攝影藝術自然而言就具有超現實的氣質(natively surreal)。<sup>6</sup> 因為繪畫與詩歌等藝術形式所能達至的效果，跟法國超現實主義所孜孜而求的，「模糊化藝術與所謂生活、物件與事件、有意與無心、專業與業餘、高貴與粗俗、匠心獨運與幸福的錯誤之間的界線」的理想，都相距甚遠。<sup>7</sup> 她指出：「超現實主義常常追求偶然，歡迎不請自來、令人心悅的無序。有甚麼比實際上是自我生產，而且是不費吹灰之力地自我生產的客體，更加超現實？…正是攝影作出了最佳的示範，展示了如何並置縫紉機與雨傘，而它們的偶然相遇被一位偉大的超現實主義詩人譽為美的典範。」<sup>8</sup>

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3 Therese Lichtenstein, "The City in Twilight", p. 11.

4 同上，頁 11 - 13。

5 同上，頁 13。

6 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: RosettaBooks, 2005), p. 40.

7 同上，頁 39。

8 同上，頁 40 - 41。

如前所述，這一批與法國超現實主義關係密切的攝影師的作品，反映了當時處於新舊高速交替下的巴黎的城市經驗。他們鏡頭下的影像既熟悉，又陌生，充滿了種種複雜的矛盾、不協調與曖昧性。可以這麼說，這一批作品之所產生的物質條件，正正在於自十九世紀以降，由奧斯曼一手打造的巴黎都市重建計劃，以及它所代表的高速的現代化進程。固然，現代化下的種種嶄新事物與經驗（例如巴黎鐵塔等地標式建築），為法國超現實主義運動帶來了無數的視覺刺激，但正在消逝中的老巴黎，也成為了他們懷鄉的對象。這也解釋了當時尤金·阿杰所拍攝的那些記錄了大量十六至十九世紀巴黎老建築的照片，那些空無一人的老巴黎街頭影像，為甚麼會令法國超現實主義者們如此著迷。簡言之，法國超現實主義攝影作品的超現實性，一方面來自現代化底下的種種嶄新事物與經驗，另一方面則來自與「當下」並存，甚至互相矛盾的「過去」。<sup>9</sup>正是這樣的背景，讓我們有機會好好重新思考香港攝影跟差不多一百多年前法國超現實主義攝影之間，為甚麼看來會有着某種奇異的親和性，而本文則希望由這裡切入，初探香港攝影作品中這種似曾相識的「超現實性」，也為今次的「香港攝影系列展覽二：城市漫遊者—社會紀實攝影」，嘗試打開一個可能的討論方向。<sup>10</sup>

## 二、香港是一座超現實城市

其實，英國學者田邁修（Matthew Turner）早在1997年已觀察到，踏入90年代，當香港人開始反省自己的身份，不再着力於迎合西方的時候，香港攝影卻出現了一種對荒涼街景甘之如飴的現象。他以水禾田主編的攝影集《香港的一天》（1991）為例指出，在該書所輯錄的五十位本地攝影師的紀實作品中，照片「以空洞的城市風景為主，其中只有半數看見有人，而且他們差不多所有人都是面目模糊，或者背向鏡頭。」<sup>11</sup>但《香港的一天》並不是獨立的例子，「無人城市」是香港九十年代攝影的一個普遍現象。他引用後殖民研究學者阿巴斯（Ackbar Abbas）有關香港的論述，指出這些作品都表現出一種對「消失」的普遍著迷，而

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9 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Rosettabooks, 2005), pp. 11-70.

10 值得注意的是，以法國超現實主義的作品作為比對，並不意味着香港攝影「曾經」受法國超現實主義的影響，更不意味着香港攝影有其自身的超現實主義運動。本文所希望做的，無寧是通過比對法國超現實主義與香港攝影作品中的「超現實性」，探討後者的社會及文化根源。至於「超現實性」是否把握香港攝影作品特點的最佳概念，筆者持開放態度，希望本文能夠拋磚引玉，為香港攝影的正名，打開一個可能的討論方向。

11 田邁修著，鄭威鵬譯，〈論香港〉，黎健強、梁寶山編著：《從過渡跨越千禧：七人視藝評論自選文集》，香港：香港藝術中心（2002年），頁18；原刊於《女那禾多》1997年3月號。

「驅使這些影像的動機不是歡慶，而是哀悼：城市景物因為在經濟利益帶動之下重建而消失。又或者，是哀悼香港人在政治權利方面的消失：關於他們自身命運的問題，都不容許他們發出聲音。」<sup>12</sup>

試看今次梁家泰的黑白膠卷攝影系列《香港的背面》以及蔡旭威的《紅外線》攝影系列。梁家泰在作品簡介中解釋：「香港雖然高樓林立，但還有一些橫街小巷鮮為人知。這城市發展的速度太嚇人了，今天這邊華廈剛建成，明天那邊的平房便夷平了；有見於此，我便找一些等待清拆的平房後巷拍下來，不一定要紀錄現實，而是把這感覺保存下來，其中有些是在建築工人動工時，趕在他們的前面拍的。」於是，我們在這一系列黑白照片中，會看見橫街小巷背後一株斷了的老樹殘骸，一間正在拆卸的房子，還有正等待拆掉的天星碼頭鐘樓，而毫無例外地，這些等待、正在或已經消失的城市空間，都是空無一人的。有趣的是，梁家泰採用了多多少少屬於「過去」的黑白膠卷攝影，來記錄在城市高速發展底下消逝的事物，留下光影印記。以「過去」收藏「過去」，但在空無一人的紀錄中，卻讓人深刻的感受到城市景觀的荒蕪。

同樣地，在蔡旭威的《紅外線》攝影系列中，作者以紅外線攝影技術拍攝同樣空無一人的街頭景觀，更加突出了香港城市風景的荒涼與超現實性。無論在梁家泰的《香港的背面》，還是蔡旭威的《紅外線》攝影系列，一切都如此熟悉，又如此陌生。它們總讓我聯想到尤金·阿杰上一個世紀為巴黎老建築所留下的那些黑白印記。拍攝不單止為了要記住，也因為城市的過去正在快速地消失。

不過，香港當代攝影的超現實性，除了可歸因於城市的消失的美學與政治之外，綜合而言，還可以歸納為以下三點：（1）混雜元素的並置和矛盾；（2）城市發展的超現實奇觀；（3）跨文化/空間的都市景觀。現援引數例，逐一簡論。

### 三、混雜元素的並置和矛盾

熟悉香港歷史的都知道，在這一個只有百多年都市化歷史的城市中，都市重建從來都沒有間斷過。可以這麼說，香港的城市發展，很大程度上都是建基在百年來一波又一波從未間斷的都市重建「破舊立新」的運動之上的。很多時，昨日的海岸線，今日已成為了車水馬龍的馬路。

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12 田邁修著，鄭威鵬譯，〈論香港〉，黎健強、梁寶山編著：《從過渡跨越千禧：七人視藝評論自選文集》，香港：香港藝術中心（2002年），頁19；原刊於《女那禾多》1997年3月號。

不過，上一個世紀八十年代末，前港英殖民政府便開始為英國「光榮引退」鋪路，推出種種龐大的基建計劃（1989年後，有所謂「玫瑰園」計劃），例如赤鱘角國際新機場的興建，而浩浩蕩蕩的市區重建計劃，亦自「土地發展公司」（即2001年成立的「市區重建局」之前身）於1988年的成立而全面開展。

因此，謝至德與蘇秀儀今次都不約而同，展出了一批記錄九十年代以來香港城市景觀的作品。在蘇秀儀今次的這一批作品中，地盤與推土機是經常出現的視覺元素。它們有時代表了市區重建大計底下的「過去」，有時又代表了都市發展所指向的「未來」。例如在她一幀有關北角馬寶道某豪宅地盤的作品中，在成行成市的小販群的前景對比下，地盤明顯代表了發展的開墾新力量。但與此同時，地盤也代表了破壞，它推倒了舊建築，剖開了土地，把一個情味濃厚的舊區變成了廢墟。就這樣，不同不協調與充滿張力的元素被並置在一起，令人心裡生起一種奇異的超現實感覺。然而，這些超現實的景觀，不單是攝影師的藝術重構，它們就在我們的日常生活當中。或許，這才讓這些影像更加超現實。

正如在謝至德今次展出的一幅作品中，當我們見到一架民航機正在一群「波友」之上低空掠過，我們會有一份難以言喻的超現實感覺，讓人想到日本動畫大師押井守名作《攻殼機動隊》中那些取材自香港舊機場附近地區的民航機低飛鏡頭。蘇珊·桑塔格說，一幅攝影作品之所以具有超現實的品質，在於它是一則來自「過去」的訊息。<sup>13</sup> 在啟德機場的年代，航機低飛本是日常的城市風景，但隔着異時空，照片中巨大的航機影像與波地上波友的自若之間的矛盾和不協調，卻讓一些我們曾經熟悉的東西變得魔幻起來。

#### 四、城市發展的超現實奇觀

在近二十多年的市區重建大計中，有破壞，自然也有建設，但問題是：高速的都市變更又為我們帶來了一些甚麼呢？不用多說，近一、二十年來，無數的舊樓舊區被拆毀或夷為平地，取而代之，不是樓層極高極多的屋苑豪宅、巨大的奇觀式建築（例如迪士尼樂園），便是差不多一模一樣的超級大商場。與市區重建開展以前，還容許地區上自由漫生的草根生活方式，現代化還比較集中在幾個城市中心地帶（例如中環和尖沙咀）的年代相比，香港的城市景觀可謂進入了一個全面奇觀化的年代。

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13 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: RosettaBooks, 2005), p. 42.

因此，陳廣源與米高·沃爾夫（Michael Wolf）今次展出的作品，都不約而同的突出了新類型建築的巨大與奇觀性。在陳廣源的《梅加浮娜》（*Megafauna*）系列作品中，我們既看到懸掛或塗繪在大廈外牆與電車車身的巨型廣告圖像，也看到維港兩岸的超級高樓。有趣的是，根據陳廣源自己的解釋，梅加浮娜指巨型動物，但自工業革命以來，除了人類與家禽外，梅加浮娜也是消失得最快的物種。看着這些巨像與高樓，不真實的超現實感悠然而生。但與此同時，我們也注意到兩位攝影師通過新建築的幾何線條，突出了這些巨物建築的同質性。

在米高·沃爾夫今次的《透明城市》（*The Transparent City*）系列作品中，拍攝對象固然是芝加哥這個美國城市。但若果我們把它們跟米高·沃爾夫過去有關香港建築的攝影作品作出比對，我們不禁要反問眼下的這些巨物建築的全球根源。奇異的是，面對一個又一個異城市的奇觀影像，我們更多想起的，可能是我城的身世。

## 五、跨文化 / 空間的都市景觀

隨着中國大陸近三十年的經濟改革開放以及全球化進程，加上交通上的四通八達，現在人們比以前有了更多機會外遊、在外地工作以及接觸異文化。事實上，過去十年，也有愈來愈多的本地文化藝術工作者有機會到內地工作、創作與生活。這反映在香港攝影的發展上，我們開始發現愈來愈多香港攝影師選擇以內地景觀為拍攝題材。

若果說，香港近一、二十年的都市重建，為本地攝影師帶來了大量的超現實城市景觀，同樣面對現代化與新舊激烈交替的內地城市，就只有過之而無不及。因此，在岑允逸與趙嘉榮今次展出的作品中，我們會看見那些奇奇怪怪的鄉鎮公園、那些扭曲與近乎矯飾的天安門廣場影像，為時代造像的同時，也為這時代呈上了一系列帶點超現實味道的文化癥兆。如果超現實性每每來自現實本身的不協調與矛盾性，那麼，文化與空間上的距離似乎為我們的攝影師的作品，帶來了更複雜的二重超現實性。在這些奇觀影像中，原本事物之間的不協調與矛盾性，固然已為攝影師們提供了順手拈來的超現實性。但與此同時，基於文化與空間上的差異，眼下的超現實景觀似乎進一步為攝影師們帶來了一重更深沉的超現實感知。在這裡，我們彷彿可以看到我城的過去、現在與未來。

## 1. Photography, Urbanscape and Surrealism

Since its invention, photography has always been closely tied with urban development. In the 1920s and 1930s, a group of photographers intimately associated with the French Surrealism movement, such as Brassai (1899-1984), Man Ray (1890-1976), André Kertész (1894-1985), Eugène Atget (1857-1927), Germaine Krull (1897-1985), Jacques-André Boiffard (1902-1961), Maurice Tabard (1897-1984), Lee Miller (1907-1977), Roger Parry (1905-1977) and Ilse Bing (1899-1998), used a large quantity of films to capture the city of Paris which was at the crossroad of old and new. Photography owed this close connection with urban development to the advance of popular media and printing technology. In wake of rapidly technological and urban development, there were lengthy newspaper and magazine reports in those days that documented the modernization of cities, and photography played an important role in the rich variety of "city vignettes". For this reason, photography was seen in movies, journalist features, postcards, publications and even police records, ethnographic accounts and scientific research reports of the time. For example, left-wing magazine *Vu* founded by Lucien Vogel (1886-1954) in 1928 recorded in text and photographic images many urban scenes of Paris, the budding metropolis. These photographers also played key roles in the avant-garde art movement known as

"Surrealism" which appeared during that time. In other words, they travelled between popular media and avant-garde arts and managed to visualize the cities in fields ranging from art galleries to newspapers and magazines.<sup>1</sup>

Looking at the works of these photographers, we can feel that mysterious and uncanny aura. They had the ability to discover unconscious optics<sup>2</sup> within found objects like memorials, cafés, ballrooms, streets and the man on the vernacular streets, extraordinary complex and contradictory

spectacles in everyday life. In addition to everyday life observations, they also made memorable optical and material

# › Urbanscape and Surreality in Hong Kong Photography

Damian Cheng

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1 Therese Lichtenstein, "The City in Twilight," *Twilight Visions: Surrealism and Paris* (University of California Press, 2009), pp. 15-20. Photography is closely associated with modernization, printing and urban development. It was also found in Shanghai in the last century. For details refer to Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930-1945* (Harvard University Press, 1999).

2 Unconscious optics is a concept coined by the German philosopher Walter Benjamin. In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", he points out, "Evidently a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye - if only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man. Even if one has a general knowledge of the way people walk, one knows nothing of a person's posture during the fractional second of a stride. The act of reaching for a lighter or a spoon is familiar routine, yet we hardly know what really goes on between hand and metal, not to mention how this fluctuates with our moods. Here the camera intervenes with the resources of its lowerings and liftings, its interruptions and isolations, its extensions and accelerations, its enlargements and reductions. The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses." See Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, edited and introduced by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2007(1969)), pp. 236-237.

imprints of Paris, a metropolis transiting from old to new, with the help of innovative lighting techniques and innovative shooting angles<sup>3</sup>. One of the exemplary works is the nocturnal photographs *Paris from Notre Dame* taken by Brassäi in 1933. In this photograph, the Chimeras (a fire breathing siren in Greek mythology with head of a lion, body of a goat and tail of a snake) perch on the top of Notre Dame, silhouetted against the dense fog, is looking down at the phantasmagoria of Paris by night. Located at the eastern half of the Île de la Cité, Notre Dame de Paris was built during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. There were originally Gargoyles on the cathedral to drive off evil demons and help drain rainwater. The chimeras seen by Brassäi was the replacements in the mid-nineteenth-century restoration of the cathedral. Like the original Gargoyles, it "possesses" the uncanny quality of appearing animate and inanimate, dead and alive."<sup>4</sup>

Therefore what we see in this photograph by Brassäi is a mysterious fusion of (seemingly) medieval demonic statue and brilliant modern lights. In the phantasmagoria of Paris by night, the past seems to have encountered the present. It is mysterious, magical and incredible. Unlike postcards, city guidebooks and sightseeing books of the time, the clean and wide boulevards painstakingly engineered under Baron Haussmann's (1809-1891) plan for Paris in the 19th century are nowhere to be seen in this work of Brassäi. What we see is an ambiguous, unstable and disorderly Paris. It tallies perfectly with the urban spectacles and mental images which trailblazers of the French Surrealism movement attempted to capture with different media.<sup>5</sup>

As the late American writer and critic Susan Sontag (1933-2004) put it, compared with art forms like painting and prose with innate defects, photography is natively surreal.<sup>6</sup> This is because the effect achieved by art forms like painting and prose is a far cry from the ideal that French surrealism industriously pursued — "Surrealism's contentious idea of blurring the lines between art and so-called life, between objects and events, between the intended and the unintentional, between pros and amateurs, between the noble and the tawdry, between craftsmanship and lucky blunders"<sup>7</sup>. She pointed out that Surrealism "has always courted accidents, welcome the uninvited, flattered disorderly presences. What could be more surreal than an object which virtually produces itself, and with a minimum of effort?... It is photography that has best shown how to juxtapose the sewing machine and the umbrella, whose fortuitous encounter was hailed by a great Surrealist poet as an epitome of the beautiful."<sup>8</sup>

As mentioned above, the works of these photographers who were closely associated with French Surrealism reflect urban experiences of Paris going through rapid transition from old to new. Their captured images are familiar and

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3 Therese Lichtenstein, "The City in Twilight," p. 11.

4 Ibid., p. 13.

5 Ibid., p. 13.

6 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Rosettabooks, 2005), p. 40.

7 Ibid., p. 39.

8 Ibid., pp. 40-41.



strange at the same time, and full of complicated contradictions, discords and ambiguities. Perhaps it can be said, materialistically speaking, these works were engendered by the Paris redevelopment plan orchestrated by Haussmann since the 19th century, and the high-speed modernization it stood for. While the new things and experiences brought by modernization (such as the building of landmarks like the Eiffel Tower) provided the French Surrealism movement with unlimited visual excitement, the fading old Paris also became a nostalgic subject for the French Surrealists. This also explains why supporters of surrealism are so captivated by Eugène Atget's photos of Paris which are packed with sixteenth to nineteenth century architecture and deserted Paris streets. Put simply, the surreality of French Surrealist photographic works comes partly from the novel things and experiences brought about by modernization, and partly from a juxtaposition of the "now" and the (even conflicting) "past".<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, it offers us the opportunity to think why there seems to be some unexpected affinities between Hong Kong photography and French Surrealist photography nearly a century ago. It is my contention to explore this *dejavu* surreality in Hong Kong photography, and to open up a possible direction to discuss the works in the exhibition "Hong Kong Photography Series 2 — City Flâneur: Social Documentary Photography".<sup>10</sup>

## 2. Hong Kong is a Surrealistic City

In fact, in as early as 1997 British scholar Matthew Turner noticed that when Hong Kong people began reflecting upon their cultural identity and refusing to subordinate themselves to the west in the 1990s, the Hong Kong photographic circle developed a great palate for desolate street scenes. He used the collection *Hong Kong 24* (1991) compiled by Water Poon as an example. This publication features documentary works by fifty local photographers. The majority of photographs are essentially scenes of "valuable image, are dominated by empty cityscapes, only half of which include figures, most of whom are blurred or turn away from the camera"<sup>11</sup> Yet *Hong Kong 24* is not an exceptional case in this respect. "Deserted city" was a motif in Hong Kong photography back in the 1990s. Based on the post-colonial discussion on Hong Kong by Ackbar Abbas, Turner points out that these works express a shared fascination about "disappearance" and "the impulse here is not to celebrate but to mourn the city's continual disappearance through the economic drive to rebuild, and, perhaps, the political disappearance of the Hong Kong people, denied a voice in their destiny."<sup>12</sup>

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9 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Rosettabooks, 2005), pp. 11-70.

10 What should be noted is that using French Surrealist photographic works for comparison does not mean Hong Kong photography "has been" influenced by the French Surrealism movement, nor does it imply Hong Kong photography has its own Surrealism movement. *This article only aspires to gain insight into Hong Kong's social and cultural roots by comparing French Surrealism and the surreality in Hong Kong photographic works.* As for whether surreality is the best concept for identifying the features of Hong Kong photography, the author takes an open view. I hope this article can attract comments and open up a direction to discuss the specificities of Hong Kong photography.

11 Matthew Turner, "On Hong Kong", *Dislocation* no. 3 (1997), p. 36.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 37.

Let us take a look at the black-and-white film series *Hong Kong from the Back* by Leong Ka Tai and photo series *Infra-red* by John Choy which are featured in this exhibition. Leong explains in his photographer's notes, "There are little lanes and alleys that few people know about among skyscrapers jostling each other in Hong Kong. The city is developing at a frightening rate. Here you see high-rises going up, there you find houses being knocked down. Therefore, I photograph the back lanes and old buildings, not merely for documentation, but to preserve feelings and memories. Some of them were taken by running fast from the back to get the front view of demolition crew." So we can see remains of a felled old tree, a building being demolished and the Star Ferry Pier clock tower just before demolition in his photographs. Without exception, all these waiting, existing or disappeared urban spaces are empty without a soul. Interestingly, Leong has chosen black-and-white film — the art form belonging to the "past" to some extent — to record objects disappearing in the course of high speed urban development. He has made photographic impressions to mark all of them. Collecting the "past" with the "past", these records of urbanscape without people forcefully interpret the desolation of urban ruins.

Likewise, John Choy has captured empty streets in his *Infra-red* series. Done with the infra-red photographic technique, these photographs accentuate the desolate and surreal feeling of Hong Kong's urbanscape. Be it Leong's or Choy's photographs, everything seems so familiar yet so estranged. These photographic series remind me of black-and-white impressions of fast disappearing old buildings in Paris shot by Eugène Atget in the last century. Photographs are not taken just to remember, but also to capture the rapidly disappearing past of a city.

While the aesthetics and politics of disappearance are contributing factors for the surreality of contemporary Hong Kong photography, the following three factors also play a key role: (1) juxtaposition and contradiction of hybridities; (2) surreal spectacles arising from urban development; and (3) cross-cultural / cross-spatial urbanscapes. Below I will adduce a few examples for brief discussion.

### **3. Juxtaposition and Contradiction of Hybridities**

Anyone familiar with the history of Hong Kong would know that in this city where urbanization has gone on for only about a hundred years, urban development has never stopped. It can be said that the urban development of Hong Kong is to a great extent built on a "Rid the Old, Set the New" campaign which triggered one wave of infrastructure development after another. In many cases, yesterday's coastline is today's busy main line.

However, the former British colonial government began paving the way for a "glorious retreat" in the late 1980s. Infrastructure projects of mega scale were launched one by one (The so-called Rose Garden Project rolled out after 1989), including constructing a new international airport in Chek Lap Kok. Meanwhile the urban renewal programme went forward with great strength and vigour since the Land Development Corporation (precursor of the Urban Renewal Authority formed in 2001) was established in 1988.



As a result, both Ducky Tse and Gretchen So have selected photographs recording Hong Kong urbanscapes since the 1990s for this exhibition. In So exhibits, construction sites and bulldozers are visual motifs. Sometimes they symbolize the "past" buried under the great urban renewal plan, and other times they mark the "future" where urban development is pointing at. For example, in a photograph of a construction site in Marble Road, North Point, we can clearly see that the work site represents the new reclamation force of development, set against vivid scene of street vendors in the foreground. At the same time, the site also represents destruction. It pulls down old buildings, cuts open the ground and turns a close-knit amiable old district into ruins. It is in this way that different, discordant and tension-filled elements are juxtaposed to create an estranged surreal feeling. These surreal scenes are not merely photographers' artistic reconstructions, but very realities found in everyday life. Perhaps this is what makes them even more surreal.

This surreality is highly visible in Tse's exhibits where we see a commercial airline jet flying low over a bunch of guys playing football. We are struck by an ineffable feeling of surreality. It brings to mind famous scenes in *The Ghost in the Shell* by Japanese animation master Mamoru Oshii. He was inspired by airline jets flowing low over neighbourhoods near the old Hong Kong airport. Susan Sontag said a photographic work has surreal quality because it is "a message from time past"<sup>13</sup>. Back in the Kai Tak Airport days, jet planes sweeping over the city was a common scene. Yet, with a temporal distance, the huge plane and the guys playing football below seem conflicting and discordant. Surprisingly, it turns something familiar surreal.

#### 4. Surreal Spectacles Arising from Urban Development

Nearly two decades of urban renewal has given rise to construction as well as destruction. The question is, what has high speed urban changes brought us? Obviously, numerous old buildings and old districts have been demolished or razed to the ground in the past ten to twenty years. In their places are mostly luxury residential developments with skyscraping multi-storey towers, spectacular big-box architecture (e.g. Disneyland) or standardized mega shopping malls. In contrast with pre-renewal years when a free rambling grassroot way of life was endured, and when modernization was concentrated only in several core urban districts (such as Central and Tsimshatsui), the urban landscape of Hong Kong has now entered an era of being fully spectacular.

Therefore we have exhibits from Dick Chan and Michael Wolf which both stress the enormousness and spectacle of new age architecture. In Chan's *Megafauna* series, we can see huge advertising images hung or painted on building exterior walls and tram bodies, as well as super high-rise buildings on both sides of Victoria Harbour. Interestingly,

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13 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Rosettabooks), p. 42.

according to Chan's own explanation, Megafauna means giant animals yet as a group they have vanished most rapidly besides humans and domestic animals since the Industrial Revolution. Looking at these colossuses and high-rise buildings, we have a sense of surreality. At the same time, we can see that both photographers choose to interpret the homogeneity of these mega buildings by highlighting their geometric lines and forms.

The US city of Chicago is the subject for *The Transparent City* series by Michael Wolf. However, if we compare this series with his previous photographs of Hong Kong architecture, a question arises as to the global root of these mega buildings. Amazingly, as we look at urban spectacles of one foreign city after another, we are most often reminded of the fate of our own city.

##### **5. Cross-cultural / Cross-spatial Urbanscapes**

With nearly thirty years of economic reform and open policy in Mainland China as well as the growth of globalization, and complemented by increasingly convenient transportations, we now have more chances to travel, work and experience cultures overseas. In fact, over the past ten years the doors are open to more and more members of the local culture and art circles to work, create art works and live in Mainland China. This trend is reflected in the development of Hong Kong photography. We are beginning to see more local photographers shooting mainland objects and scenes.

If it can be said that Hong Kong's urban redevelopment over the past ten to twenty years has supplied photographers with a wealth of surreal cityscapes, this is more evident in mainland cities which are facing equally rigorous modernization and transition from old to new. Therefore in the exhibits by Dustin Shum and Karl Chiu we have weird rural town parks and images of Tiananmen Square twisted almost to the state of feigning with the style of photographic "mannerism". While being images of the times, these works also present cultural symptoms of our times with a touch of surreality. If surreality is often created by discord or contradiction of reality itself, then cultural and spatial difference seems to have added a more complex dual surreality to the works of our photographers. In these spectacular images, surreality is readily available in the discord and contradiction among objects. At the same time, given the difference in culture and space, surreal scenes featured here seem to have brought a deeper sense of surreality to the photographers. It is as if we could see the past, present and future of our city.