

Searching for Dust-Covered Images in Ruined Spaces: A Conversation with Li Wei and Liang Chen on the Art of Found Images

Interviewer: Ann Lyuwenyu Zhang 张吕文煜

Note: On April 25, 2025, I conducted a conversation with the artist duo Li Wei 李维 and Liang Chen 梁晨 on the topic of Found Footage. We discussed their ongoing ruin photography project *Dust and Scratches* (Figure 1), as well as their reflections on the relationship between spaces undergoing demolition in Wuhan and the abandoned family photos. The conversation also touched on the role of photographs as consumer goods within planned obsolescence in the Chinese context, and the transformation of image technologies from the analogue to the digital era. This article presents selected conversations from that interview.



Liang Chen (left); Li Wei (right)



Figure 1. *Dust and Scratches* 蒙尘与划痕 (partial)

Ann Lyuwenyu Zhang (hereafter referred to as Zhang): To begin, could Li Wei and Liang Chen briefly introduce yourselves and talk about what first drew you to ruins and found footage art, as well as your current working status?

Li Wei: I am a designer, photographer, and a collector of image-based media objects.

Liang Chen: I work in visual design and currently teach in the School of Design at Wuhan University of Communication. I am also an enthusiast of field observation and modernology.

Li Wei: ‘Ruins’ constitute a classic subcultural category, with a traceable lineage in the field of art history, and are closely tied to photographic culture. A categorization I find compelling divides ruin spaces into four types: cultural, industrial, public, and residential. *Dust and Scratches* focuses on residential ruins that are distinctly localized in the Chinese context, with ‘demolition’ 拆迁 at their core. This is tied to the land system in mainland China and the development of the real estate economy, and it intersects with the formative experiences of Liang Chen’s and my generation. I was born and raised in Beijing, a city with an expansive, historically rich old town area. As the capital and a central city in multiple senses, it underwent multiple waves of demolition and reconstruction during its rapid modernization. This process unfolded throughout the 1990s and early 2000s—looking back now, I realize how belatedly I became aware of it.

Liang Chen: When people observe something, they often unconsciously project their own experiences onto it, generating empathy. I have a persistent attachment to the spaces I lived in as a child. My hometown, Shiyan 十堰, is a mountain city in Hubei Province, developed as a migrant city through the Third Front Movement 三线工程. The spatial range of my daily life during childhood was very small—my home, my grandmother’s home, my father’s workplace, my kindergarten, elementary school, middle school, and the shopping mall and theater that I frequented—all were within a ten-minute walk.

Around 2010, redevelopment began in my community at Liuyan Mountain 六堰山, and half of the mountain was carved away. All the spaces I had lived in and played in as a child—including my own home, my grandmother’s home, my friends’ homes—were wiped out. The spatial environment of my hometown, like my childhood, became irretrievable. At that time, I found demolition to be a slow and melancholic process, and in high school I began photographing the interior of my grandmother’s home before her relocation, along with various demolition sites, using the flip phone and compact digital camera I had at the time. In fact, I began photographing ruins much earlier than Li Wei.

What I regret the most is that I wasn’t involved in either of the two moves of my own family and of my grandmother’s home, and I didn’t even know about them right away. My parents may have thought it unnecessary to trouble a child with such matters. At the time I was away at university in another city, and I was only informed afterwards that the home had been moved. By the time I returned, it was already the ‘new home’. I never saw what those spaces looked like in the end, and no one in the family had taken any parting photographs to commemorate it. This is one reason why I am especially interested in the type of residential ruins that Li Wei mentioned—those that bear traces of life.

Most of the ruins we explore in Wuhan are similar to the work unit family housing and early commercial

apartment blocks where my family and my grandmother lived. At the time, renovation options were limited, so one finds many similar interior layouts, furniture arrangements, and household items. I often saw terrazzo floors identical to my grandmother's, green-painted wall skirts identical to those of her apartment; curtains, bedsheets, TV doilies just like the ones in my childhood home; and children's height marks, doodles, stickers, award certificates, timetables, and celebrity posters on the walls. These spatial samples are reflections of the lifestyle of a particular era.

As our exploration deepened, my feelings began to shift. I had always assumed that every home was unique, but as these spaces revealed themselves one by one in cross-section, the sheer number of similarities became apparent. It turns out that many objects and experiences were shared by people. Knowing that, past regrets gave way to a kind of acceptance, and I found myself asking: what exactly is it that I'm nostalgic for?

Li Wei: I moved three times while growing up, so I strongly identify with Liang Chen's account. Even though Beijing and Wuhan are a thousand kilometers apart, I've often encountered spaces in Wuhan's ruins that resemble my grandmother's and maternal grandmother's homes—these spaces that were abandoned due to demolition are reminiscent of my childhood. These are no longer 'homes' but familiar-yet-strange spaces of recollection.

As a first-tier city, Wuhan is still undergoing large-scale demolition and construction, whereas cities like Beijing and Shanghai are already in a 'completed' stage. In the past two years, we've explored twenty to thirty demolition zones across Wuhan's three towns. One key factor that gave us this 'window of opportunity' may have been the Covid-19 pandemic. This enormous force majeure slowed or even suspended demolition processes in many areas. Some neighborhoods were half-demolished, and some former residents had yet to move out, leaving entry points intact—though often concealed.

Liang Chen: These ruin spaces changes over time, bearing overlapping tracks left by demolition workers and scavengers. Wooden furniture is smashed, wiring is stripped from the walls, salvageable household appliances are collected, and even mattress springs are pulled out for recycling. But items such as clothing and personal belongings are rarely touched—they're no longer of use. This includes photographs, negatives, and albums (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Found images by Liang Chen and Li Wei

In a recent outing, I was examining scattered photographs in a room when a woman walked in. At first, she assumed I was a fellow scavenger. But as we talked and she realized I was looking for photographs, she asked, puzzled, ‘What use is that?’ Afterward, we each searched and took what we needed—she made several trips to carry away anything that could be sold.

Li Wei: As Liang Chen described, demolition is a process of resource reclamation and reuse—from wooden furniture and copper wiring in rooms, to the steel and bricks in buildings, and ultimately the most valuable asset in urban redevelopment: land.

Ruin spaces are extremely messy. Sometimes, finding a single photograph prompts us to look more closely, and often we’ll discover others nearby. Some photographs or albums may be buried under surrounding debris. Many households do not seem to have had a specific place to store image-based materials. We often find photos, albums, negatives, and envelopes for the negatives mixed with documents—and even with buttons, sewing supplies, stationery, and charging cables—all stuffed into a single drawer. When demolition workers or scavengers arrive, the wooden furniture itself is more valuable than these scattered contents, so they pull out the drawers and dump everything onto the floor. Once the wood of the furniture is taken, the photographs are left behind. By the time a building is about to be torn down, most spaces have already been stripped bare, yet if you look carefully, you can still find photographs—waiting to be pulverized along with the building as the final layer of waste.

Liang Chen: In a way, both of us are ‘scavengers’. Li Wei does film photography in the ruins—what we might call ‘image scavenging’. I pick up specific kinds of objects as well. Besides photographs, I have several themes—keys are one of them. From a practical perspective, old keys are useless to a house that has been relocated—many of these houses don’t even have doors anymore—but they function as metaphors with rich interpretive and metaphorical potential. I’ve collected about 1,500 keys so far. I also collect toys, especially kid’s meal toys from McDonald’s and KFC. These are well made and usually stamped with their year of production. I once discussed with Li Wei how going to McDonald’s or KFC was a reward from our parents when we were little, and those toys were something we longed for. For example, the Colonel Sanders handheld game console, or McDonald’s Snoopy series—it’s heartbreaking to see them abandoned in ruins. Recently I also discovered a type of old hollow brick, often split in half amid the rubble. They’re instantly recognizable because they bear anthropomorphic distressed and comical facial expressions—which is very cute. Though they’re quite heavy, we picked up a few and gave them a name: ‘Zhake-berger’ 渣克伯格 (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Keys, ‘Zhake-berger’, toys

Li Wei: We also pay attention to the anthropological dimensions of ruin spaces. As Liang Chen just mentioned, we speak with residents who haven't yet moved out, with demolition workers and scavengers, observing how they navigate and inhabit the ruins. In some cases, we've discovered secret gathering spots for slingshot and air rifle enthusiasts. All of these are worthy of further investigation. The 'ruin' is a pluralistic site, and our exploration is equally plural. Found footage art is one of the more developed and mature threads within it.

Zhang: This brings us directly to my second question. Unlike many other artists working with found footage, the images that you focus on are directly connected to the spaces in which they are located—both physically and emotionally. Could you elaborate on this relationship between space and image in your practice, and also reflect on the verb 'found' as it pertains to found footage art?

Liang Chen: In our work, space and image are directly linked. Once, we found a video tape in a room that had been nearly stripped bare and was covered in dust. Upon digitizing the tape, we discovered it recorded a wedding ceremony. The only object in the room that still retained traces of its past appearance was a chandelier. We browsed through the footage and located that very chandelier in the frame, confirming that this was the same house where the wedding took place. We then looked more closely at the details in the video and noticed a portrait of the bride once hung on the wall. In the corresponding spot within the ruin, the wall bore a faint imprint where the picture had long hung, a residue left by dust. Following this clue, we searched among the debris and dead leaves on the floor nearby and managed to find the bride's portrait. It was thickly coated in dust and barely legible in the dim light of the room unless lit directly (Figure 4). Starting with a piece of abandoned home footage, we uncovered mutually confirming evidence within the very space where the image had been recorded. It was an indescribably moving experience, and it reminded me of the Finish documentary *Iceberg Shadow* (2009).

A segment of video and a single photograph—these are like fleeting fragments of the space's past life and memory. The neighboring building was already under demolition. How much longer would this one remain? Perhaps it has already been torn down as we speak. We don't know whether the owners of these images saved any digital copies before discarding them. Or perhaps these images had already ceased to matter? Have the memories they carried also vanished along with them?



Figure 4. Video tapes found in ruins and digitized version brought back to the site

Li Wei: The central subject of *Dust and Scratches* is the material medium of abandoned images within abandoned spaces. As Liang Chen just mentioned, videotapes are relatively rare among our finds. More common-

ly, we come across large wedding portraits. These may have been left behind simply because of their large size and the inconvenience of transporting them, leading to their abandonment during the actual logistics of moving. The accumulated wear and tear in the ruins accelerates their deterioration—frames fall apart (Figure 10), photos shift or fall out of their frames, and in extreme cases the images are completely destroyed, leaving only empty frames. From the outside, the most striking visual feature of a ruined building is its window openings—no glass, no light inside—so from afar the structure appears as a grid of dark rectangles. I find those empty rectangles strikingly similar to the empty photo frames.

This visual intertextuality points to the two key terms in the series title: ‘dust’ 蒙尘 and ‘scratches’ 划痕. ‘Dust’ refers to being covered in dust—that is, being set aside and becoming obsolete. ‘Scratch’ refers to wear and abrasion—that is, the depletion of its utility. Both conditions result in the object’s fate as a commodity: abandonment. On this level, *Dust and Scratches* functions as a kind of death portrait for these spaces and things.

Liang Chen: Every time I encounter family images in a ruin, I can’t help but feel nostalgia and a sense of cherishing—but more than that, I feel confusion: why weren’t these photos taken along when they moved? If I were moving, I would definitely bring them. At first, I thought it was an isolated phenomenon, but the more we explored, the more common it turned out to be. A large number of family photographs are left behind in ruins. So why is it that I don’t feel particularly sorry when I see abandoned furniture or clothing, but I feel deeply saddened when I see family photos?

Approaching the question from a designer perspective, we considered the concept of ‘planned obsolescence’: the idea that a product’s usable life is deliberately limited at the design stage, so that after a certain period its function fails, its style becomes outdated, and it must be scrapped and replaced. When coupled with advertising, consumers develop a desire for new products and a perceived need to purchase them. Clothes, appliances, furniture, even home fixtures and real estate itself, all fall within this system of obsolescence. Image production is embedded in this same logic: photographs are tethered to physical prints, and those prints, together with cameras, film, and photo processing services, constitute an ecosystem that is also subject to planned obsolescence. When we were children, Kodak advertisements told us: every moment of life is precious, it should be photographed, and only with photographs can memory be preserved and transmitted. This narrative resembles the marketing strategies used for fine jewelry: every family ought to take photographs, and those photographs ought to be treasured.

But reality does not live up to this ideal. Photos age: they fade, warp, mold, and tear. People grow tired of the old and seek the new. The emotional value that photos once held also wears out, becomes obsolete, accumulates dust. What distinguishes them from other items is their deeply personal nature. A photograph reveals that someone was once here. It makes the passage of time palpable. Even when mixed in with clothing and random household items, photos are visually arresting and emotionally affecting.

Li Wei: Liang Chen’s account weaves people and memory into the relationship between space and image. I want to switch to a microscopic perspective and talk about how we observe dust. Dust is a minute yet ubiquitous presence in every space. I’ve become increasingly interested in it through our ruin explorations.

Textually speaking, the title of this photography series comes from a filter in Photoshop. I was struck by the translation of ‘dust’ as ‘蒙尘’ in the phrase ‘dust and scratches’. While *dust* may be directly rendered as 灰尘 in Chinese, ‘蒙尘’ carries poetic overtones. In classical Chinese, the phrase originally referred to emperors in exile, fleeing through wind and dust; it later came to refer more generally to beautiful things that have been neglected or buried. The character 尘 itself is nuanced—it is composed of ‘small’ 小 and ‘earth’ 土, appearing simple but rich in connotation. A whole set of expressions with 尘 in them connects dust, earth, and the human world: ‘mortal world’ 尘世, ‘red dust’ 红尘, ‘trials of life’ 风尘, ‘former life’ 前尘, ‘posterity’ 后尘, ‘speed to transcend’ 绝尘, ‘to be sealed in dust’ 尘封. I find that 蒙尘 encapsulates the condition of family photographs in ruins with remarkable precision (Figure 5).

Demolition, as part of the modernization process, replaces work unit family housing with high-rise housing. Cleanliness has become a key trait of contemporary living spaces: sealed windows, air conditioning, purifiers, vacuum cleaners, robotic floor cleaners, professional janitorial services—all these systems work to prevent the accumulation of dust indoors. But unless one lives in a surgical or laboratory-grade environment, even the cleanest homes contain blind spots: the upper edge of a picture frame, or the narrow crevice between two pieces of furniture. Dust is inevitable. When a residence becomes a ruin, it is no longer enclosed or maintained, and all cleaning systems cease to function. Construction dust from demolition in adjacent buildings seeps in, and dust accumulates freely throughout the ruin. This reminds me of Mary Douglas’s classic anthropological work *Purity and Danger*, in which she argues that dirt threatens order. In this sense, demolition sites are temporary and unstable corners of modern urban space.



Figure 5. Dust-covered family photo found in ruins

Visually, dust is extraordinarily expressive. I pay special attention to a certain type of scene: in the past, writing desks were prized pieces of furniture. To protect their surfaces from scratches, people would often place a glass panel on top. Between the glass and the desktop, they would insert photographs, letters, business cards, receipts—the desktop thus functioned both as a memo board and a display. As one worked at the desk, these items under the glass remained in one’s view. After a household is vacated, these items are often left behind, and over time, dust accumulates on the glass. The images beneath are only faintly visible. I find that photo-

graphing such a scene is particularly resonant with the notion of ‘dust’ 蒙尘 in *Dust and Scratches*.

Liang Chen: I would like to add one more point, which could be considered part of the broader relationship between image and space. When found images is both discovered and exhibited in the same city, its local embeddedness becomes unexpectedly pronounced during the creative process. *Dust and Scratches* was included in an exhibition in Wuhan. To complement the wall-mounted photographs, we recreated the ‘desk-top photo display’ 书桌展示照片 scenario that Li Wei mentioned earlier as part of the exhibition setup. We purchased an old writing desk, had a custom glass panel made for it, and placed some of the photographs we had found into the space beneath the glass. On the final day of the exhibition, one of the photos was unexpectedly recognized by a visitor—he saw members of his own family and relatives in the image.

Later, we carefully reviewed the rest of that family’s photographs and albums and found one that was particularly commemorative: the family had once taken a picture on the rooftop platform of their apartment building, with Wuhan’s landmark television tower visible in the background. The photo had been taken in the 1980s, when the tower was still under construction. We returned to that very spot on the rooftop with the image and took a photograph of the photograph (Figure 15). About half a year later, that building was demolished.

Zhang: I know that both of you also frequently visit flea markets and antique markets to purchase and collect abandoned images. This process differs slightly from finding images in ruins, because the images in markets are clearly priced—meaning their nature has shifted. Could you discuss this experience in more detail, and share your reflections on the images that ended up in the marketplace?

Li Wei: In the Chinese domestic antiques trade system, old photographs are categorized as ‘miscellaneous items’ 杂项, and they are often mixed with letters, documents, tickets, and other so-called ‘nostalgic’ everyday objects. Their market volume does not compare to the major categories of mainstream antiques. However, old photographs are ubiquitous. They can be found across all levels of the market—from auction houses, to major antique markets in various cities, to flea markets and makeshift ghost markets in alleyways. Through our explorations in these venues, I found that their system of valuation operates in a top-down logic: images from the Republic of China period and ‘red images’ from after 1949 are the most prized. The family photographs we discover in ruins mainly originate from the 1980s and 1990s, the period when image commercialization in China was becoming widespread, and they exist in massive quantities. In a market that prizes scarcity and so-called ‘vintage aura’, these photographs are of extremely low monetary value—often sold at just a few dozen yuan for several hundred prints. In some upstream distribution channels, they are sometimes even sold by weight.

Liang Chen: If we gather together all the photographs that we have collected, we can piece together the life trajectories of people born in several different decades. Our parents were born in the 1960s; members of their generation married and had children at roughly the same stage of their lives, and their children—like us—are part of the post-1990s generation. Our growing up coincided with the arrival of color photo development networks in China—photo shops operated by Kodak, Fujifilm, and other global imaging giants. In large and medium-sized cities, consumer photographic products gradually became popular. Countless snapshots of family life were taken and developed, then stored in small photo albums often provided free of charge by the

processing shops. At the same time, studio portraits became widespread—wedding photos, family portraits, one-year-old commemorative photos, personal photo shoots—and large-format prints were mounted and prominently displayed in people’s homes. These found photographs are traces of the development of visual consumer culture. They resonate deeply with us, personally and emotionally, but their value has yet to be recognized in the collectors’ market.

Li Wei: I once purchased a set of Kodak EasyShare CCD digital cameras from an online vintage camera shop (Figure 6). This product represents a transitional phase between analogue and digital imaging technologies. In the early 2000s, digital cameras were on the rise, but due to limitations in display technology, physical prints remained the mainstream format. The EasyShare cameras came with a printer dock, allowing users to print photos at home. I bought the set specifically because it contained photographs taken by its previous owner—I had never before encountered born-digital found images. The package also included an unopened box of photo paper, and I was particularly struck by the tagline printed on it: ‘Brilliant Color Photo That Last Over 100 Years’. An asterisk followed: ‘*Under typical home display conditions...’ The phrase ‘100 years’ was clearly a marketing slogan, although perhaps Kodak could justify it through its R&D and quality testing standards. But even assuming a photograph could technically last ‘100 years’, how many photos are actually being preserved and cherished for a full century?

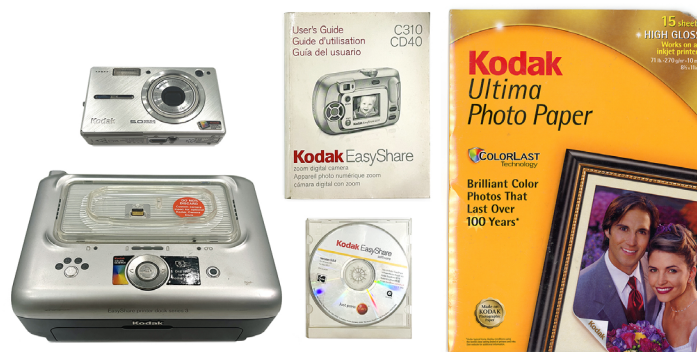


Figure 6. A collection of Kodak EasyShare camera, photo paper, and printer

People believe that cameras faithfully record what is seen, and that images can preserve emotion and memory. But the human mind is like the Ship of Theseus—sailing down the river of time, we drift ever further from our past selves. The planks of feeling and memory are continually worn down, discarded, and replaced. Once a plank has been swapped out, it no longer seems important. The image associated with it also loses its value, and it becomes easier to understand why these photographs are eventually abandoned in ruins or circulated through secondhand markets.

Liang Chen: Typically, a photograph is interpreted from three perspectives: the photographer, the subject, and the viewer. But if we consider the photograph as an object, there is a fourth perspective—that of the ‘possessor’ 隶属者, the one who owns the image and holds the rights to edit or dispose of it. For a family photograph, this implicates the internal relationships within the family, including the question of how memory inheritance is handled. Times of decluttering, moving, or family upheaval often become the turning points in the fate of these domestic images. The ultimate destination of a photograph is often determined by its possessor. As Li Wei just mentioned, and as we’ve been emphasizing all along, the dispersal of images evokes a sense of melancholy and sadness. This is one possible interpretation. But photography is a reproducible technology—negatives can be retained, images can be rephotographed or scanned, and the physical object can

be discarded without necessarily losing the image; these brings out another set of possibilities. What we see in ruins and secondhand markets is the end result of a process, but when we attempt to trace it backward, the causes of disposal remain largely unknown—there’s a great deal of speculation involved.

In the antique market, the merchant becomes the photograph’s possessor, which introduces additional unknown variables. On several occasions, we came across family photo albums whose contents—people, time periods when they were taken—lacked any internal consistency. We began to wonder: were these really the photographs of a single family? Later, we learned that if a photo album had any blank spaces, sellers would sometimes insert old photographs of a similar age into the gaps to make the album appear complete—this, according to their standards, improves the item’s visual appeal. We discussed this phenomenon with a photography collector, who confirmed that he had developed techniques to identify such ‘collage albums’ and had accumulated experience in negotiating with vendors over these practices.

Zhang: My next question builds on this. In contemporary Chinese image-based art, there has been a growing number of works based on found materials—for example, those by Lei Lei or Thomas Sauvin. As participants in this phenomenon, I’d like to hear your thoughts on its emergence in the context of contemporary China. Is the fascination with found footage related to our broader historical environment, or perhaps to the trajectory of image-based art in China?

Liang Chen: Among domestic works that use found footage as the base material, *Beijing Silvermine* 北京银矿 is indeed a landmark project. For Li Wei and me, both born in the 1990s, viewing it feels like flipping through our own family photo albums—it’s very familiar. For example, McDonald’s and KFC entered the mainland market in the late 1980s, and consuming ‘Western fast food’ became fashionable at the time. Many people took photos with the Ronald McDonald sculpture on the bench outside McDonald’s restaurants—Li Wei and I both took such photos as children (Figure 7). So when we found similar images in ruins, we were thrilled. Later, we began looking for them in secondhand markets, but for a long time we found only one. In the image archive of *Beijing Silvermine*, however, there are nearly 200 such portraits, which illustrates how widespread the practice was. It has become part of our public memory. This may explain why the project is referred to as a ‘silvermine’—a vast visual cultural archive, where the accumulation of quantity opens up artistic possibilities that go beyond photography studies.



Figure 7. Li Wei (left) and Liang Chen (middle) and a found image example (right) of posing with Ronald McDonald sculptures

Li Wei: With today’s faster information exchange, and the diversification of photographic subjects and vocabularies, found footage art has become a prominent and even popular practice. It holds significant potential: oscillating between the private and the public, the individual and the collective, memory and history, am-

ateur and professional. Its meanings shift across these oppositions, and this complexity has attracted attention from both artists and scholars. The works, research, and methods it inspires have generated responses across photography, film, anthropology, sociology, and history. One essay that greatly inspired me is ‘A Farewell to the Family Album? (And Case Study on the Cultural History of Wedding Photography)’, by Mette Sandbye, included in *The Routledge Companion to Photography and Visual Culture*, edited by Moritz Neumüller. It offers a comprehensive overview of how family photos have been used in found footage art in works overseas. And I am particularly interested in one genre that artists exploring their own family and then extend to personal image-making concerning intimacy and identity. One recent example I encountered is Su Yuezhao’s 苏月斫 photobook *Guangming Building* 光明楼.

If we consider the broader context, nostalgia has become a prevailing theme in popular culture. As imaging technologies have shifted from analogue to digital, this transformation has brought a sense of estrangement and unfamiliarity—this distance creates a certain beauty.

For our project, we are indeed operating within time limits imposed by several processes. Analog imaging technologies are founded on film and paper, and these media are currently being phased out — perhaps in another twenty or thirty years, once the long tail of technological iterations has run its course, there will no longer be opportunities to come across paper photographs and film. At the same time, urban demolition constitutes another temporal constraint: when we spoke with second-hand market vendors, they indicated that peaks in the acquisition of image materials often coincide with large-scale demolition and reconstruction in a city. Such demolition triggers mass relocations across many neighborhoods; numerous family images are thrown away or sold as scrap, and ultimately disperse into the market.

This reminds me of *Pictures from the Street* (Bilder von der Straße), a series of work by German artist Joachim Schmid (Figure 8). Beginning in 1982, he collected photographs discarded on the streets around the world and systematically categorized them into a found footage archive. The artist continued this project for 30 years, terminating it in 2012. In a lecture, he explained the reason: it had become nearly impossible to find photographs on the street, because image consumption had shifted to digital media.

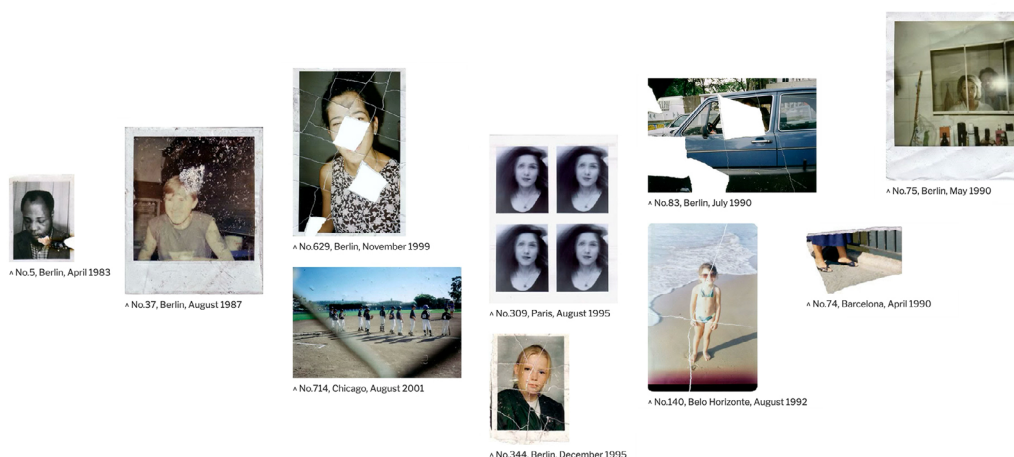


Figure 8. *Pictures from the Street* (<https://www.lumpenfotografie.de/2006/01/01/bilder-von-der-strasse-1982-2012/>)

Liang Chen: Joachim Schmid is now creating works based on born-digital found footage. Searching for such images in mobile phones, computer hard drives, social media platforms, and short video apps might call for an entirely different creative method.

I work at a university and often talk with students born in the 2000s or later. I can deeply relate to what Li Wei just said about the sense of estrangement created by the analogue to digital transition. For those born in the digital era, analogue imaging technologies are not outdated—on the contrary, they are novel. Because they never used these formats growing up, these ‘images from the past’ feel new and interesting. For an artist like Thomas Sauvin, these ‘images from the past’ may offer an anthropological or micro-historical perspective on the lifestyles of the people living in Beijing from the 1980s to the early 2000s. For us, as post-90s individuals, these images resonate as memories of our own childhood. For post-2000s youth, however, these outdated photographic technologies present a fresh, playful, and trendy visual language. This past graduation season, many students took graduation photos not just with phones, but with film cameras, CCD cameras, and instant film cameras. For them, this is a newly meaningful ritualistic experience.

Li Wei: Returning to the topic of ruins, speaking specifically about Wuhan, I feel a strong sense of urgency. The stagnation during the pandemic has gradually faded, and the pace of demolition is accelerating. In many places, once a demolition crew arrives, they flatten the buildings very quickly, leaving no opportunity for detailed exploration. Many photos are simply buried in the ruins.

Every city has its own process of development. I once zoomed in on other nearby cities—like Hangzhou—using satellite imagery and found that they don’t have as many large-scale demolition areas as Wuhan. Many cities have already moved beyond the large-scale demolition phase and have become modular, modernized cities with few remaining old districts. Two or three years from now, the twenty or thirty neighborhoods we currently explore might be gone. At that point, our project might come to an end.

Earlier, Liang Chen noted that these spaces often resemble each other. But every region and city still has its own particularities—for example, Wuhan’s characteristic bamboo beds and *diaozi* 吊子 (a type of clay pot). One day, when new commercial housing complexes rise, when road signs are changed, and when satellite maps are updated, these histories may be gradually forgotten. They are too micro, perhaps even unworthy of being called history—just a record of the material and spatial memories of a single neighborhood in a specific time.

Liang Chen: The English term ‘found image’ reminds me of an everyday phrase: ‘lost and found’. When we pick up photographs in ruins or search for them in secondhand markets, we become their new possessors. Although we may use our experience, research, and speculation to piece together their significance, the original memories and meanings have already been lost. They cannot be fully recovered. This is a process of being found, yet still lost. Our act of ‘finding’ thus confers a new meaning—it results in new stories, relationships, and connections.

For many found image artworks, the artist’s work begins after the ‘finding’. As designers, we pay closer attention to the circulation of material objects and the shifting value of images as commodities. The meaning of these images is open, plural, and full of possibility—whether in terms of the creator’s expression or the

viewer's interpretation, there is no single answer.

Zhang: For the final question, I'd like to ask both of you to talk about your current artistic projects and what kinds of works you hope to realize in the future.

Li Wei: Recently, I've been interested in creating a visual typology of dust. As I mentioned earlier, the accumulation of dust is temporal in nature. By observing the thickness and form of dust in different spaces, we can relate it to the length of time that the space has been abandoned—one year, two years, ten years. Dust is compositionally very complex. At a more micro level, I'd like to examine its material content—what exactly is it made of? This would fall within the realm of photomicrography. At a macro level, I'm interested in the dust generated by demolition and its dispersal patterns. I want to understand certain characteristics of dust formation: why does dust, over time, curl into little rolls? Since it's also a desiccant, it absorbs moisture—under what conditions does it begin to adhere to photographs or to the surface of glass?

Some of the found photographs we've collected from ruins couldn't be photographed on the spot due to lighting conditions or other constraints, so I carried them home flat in my hands to shoot them there. In exploring the relationship between the layer of dust and the image beneath it, I've experimented with different lighting angles. Using side lighting, you can see only the dust; the image underneath is completely obscured. But with front lighting, the outline of the subject in the photographs beneath faintly emerges. There is so much latent potential in dust—it's a layer full of possibilities.

Another project relates to the writing desks and glass panels we discussed earlier. The desk surface forms a large picture frame, which reminds me of the widgets on a computer or a smartphone. Many people set images of their family as the background of chat apps or as their screensaver. In the pre-screen era, placing photos on one's desk beneath glass ensured they were visible every day—these were cherished images. But from the perspective of professional image preservation, placing a photo in direct contact with glass is a mistake. When the gelatin layer on the photographic paper absorbs moisture, it bonds with the structure of the glass. I've encountered many cases where the photo was stuck to the glass. The current professional method involves cold mounting the photographs, and when framing, a mat board is added to keep the glass elevated, preventing contact with the photographic surface. On one occasion, we found an entire glass panel embedded in a ruin, and we took it to a glass shop to have it cut. In this case, the 'found object' was not only the images but also the glass surface to which they adhered to. I want to create a series of works based on photographs that have become fused with glass—where both elements are found and preserved together.

Liang Chen: Li Wei focuses more on the thematic and visual language of photography. For me, when I see these photographs in ruins, I'm often reminded of the disorganized and unreflective way my own family's images were managed. It makes me want to organize my family archive. When I was little, my mother was the one who arranged our family albums. We have quite a few albums, well-preserved, and also a large number of negatives. Recently I collected all of those negatives from home. Although they were preserved, I have no idea when many of them were taken. While reviewing them, I realized that the albums only represent a small selection—they're curated collections. Photos that are pasted together in an album might not even belong to the same event. They could be years apart, but their proximity in the album leads one to believe the scenes happened around the same time. So by organizing these negatives, I might rediscover forgotten child-

hood memories or ‘re-find’ visual traces of spaces that no longer exist. I’m really looking forward to doing that, though the workload will be enormous.

Li Wei: Our exploration of ruins and interest in found images has actually led to a new project. It all started when we discovered a hand-colored wedding portrait in a ruin. Based on other materials the family had left behind in that space, we were able to deduce that their child was around the same age as the two of us—a fellow member of the post-90s generation. Their parents were about the same age as our own, and had married around the same time. That struck an empathetic chord with me. So we are thinking of reprinting a hand-colored photograph from the original negative and returning it to the family. Originating from this idea of hand-colored photographs, we also hope to explore the declining state of the once-thriving state-owned photo studio industry, the community of colorists, and the craft of hand-coloring photography.

Liang Chen: In *Amélie* (2001), a film we both love, there’s a scene in which the protagonist, Amélie, finds a small box hidden in the bathroom tiles of her home (Figure 9). That discovery sets her on a journey to return the box to its original owner. she eventually succeeds and finds love along the way. I think objects really can create connections between people. For us, this whole undertaking has many possible forms of presentation. No single work is the endpoint—it’s the sustained experience and process of thinking that matters most.



Figure 9. Screenshots from *Amélie* (2001)

Details of *Dust and Scratches*



Figure 10. *Dust and Scratches*: a photo dislocated from the frame.



Figure 11. *Dust and Scratches*: the inside of a ruined home; sometimes the ceiling is halfway demolished and one can see the 'home' from a God-like perspective



Figure 12. *Dust and Scratches*: almost all of the ruined building have no glass over the windows; all the windows look like darkened squares from afar.

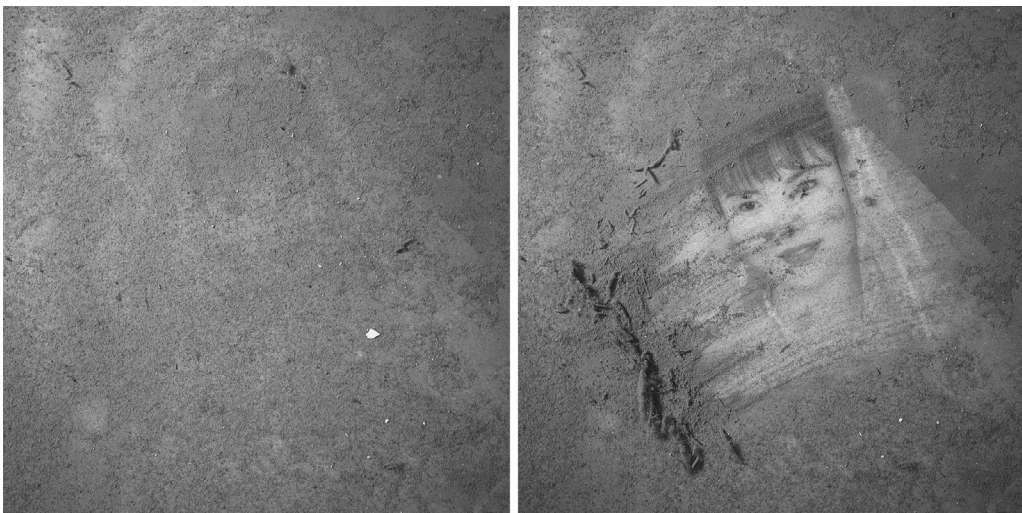


Figure 13. *Dust and Scratches*: a photo of a bride discovered through a video tape found in the ruin.



Figure 14. *Dust and Scratches*: family photos pressed under the glass desktop.



Figure 15. *Dust and Scratches*: a found photo brought back to the ruin where it was found; the tower in the back is the Wuhan Tortoise Mountain TV Tower, finished in June 1986.