

# aperture



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Winter 2010/Issue no. 201

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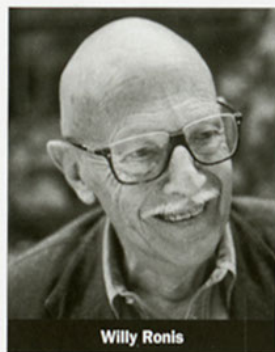
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Courtesy the artist





Willy Ronis



Walter Guadagnini



Magdalene Keaney



Lynsey Addario (left) and Elizabeth Rubin



Ariella Azoulay

**LYNSEY ADDARIO** is based in New Delhi, where she photographs for the *New York Times* and *National Geographic*, among other publications. She is the recipient of several awards, including a 2002 ICP Infinity Award, a MacArthur Fellowship in 2009, and a Pulitzer Prize in 2009 for her photographs with the story "Talibanistan," part of the *New York Times* team prize for International Reporting.

**DAVID ADLER** is a producer of arts documentaries. He is currently working on a documentary about the creation of a painted backdrop in a maximum-security prison.

**ARIELLA AZOULAY** teaches visual culture and contemporary philosophy at the Program for Culture and Interpretation, Bar Ilan University, Tel Aviv. She is the author of numerous books, including *The Civil Contract of Photography* (Zone Books, 2008); *Death's Showcase* (MIT Press, 2001), winner of the ICP Infinity Award; and most recently, *Civil Imagination: The Political Ontology of Photography* (Resling, 2010).

**ROGER BALLEEN**, originally from New York, has been living and taking photographs in South Africa since 1982. His work is held in the collections of such museums as the Maison Européenne de la Photographie in Paris and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and is exhibited internationally.

**CLARE BUTCHER** is a curator and writer from Harare, Zimbabwe, currently living and working in Eindhoven, the Netherlands.

**WALTER GUADAGNINI** lives in Bologna, where since 1992 he has been chair of the contemporary art history department at the Accademia di Belle Arti. He is the author of *Fotografia* (Zanichelli, 2000) and *Storia della fotografia del XX secolo* (forthcoming from Zanichelli). He heads the photography department of *Il giornale dell'arte*.

**AXEL HOEDT** is currently working on a book featuring his *Fastnacht* work in collaboration with

Ute Eskildsen of Essen's Museum Folkwang; it will be released in early 2011. An exhibition of the project, curated by Magdalene Keaney, is on view at the Fashion Space Gallery, London College of Fashion, until November 14, 2010.

**MAGDALENE KEANEY** is the curator of the Fashion Space Gallery, London College of Fashion, and the author of several books, including most recently *Irving Penn: Portraits* (Abrams, 2010).

Originally from Tel Aviv, **AIM DEUELLE LÜSKI** exhibits internationally. His work is on view in a group show at Israel's Petach Tikva Museum of Art and will be featured in a one-man show curated by Ariella Azoulay at the Bat Yam Museum of Contemporary Art, opening September 2012.

**CAROLE NAGGAR**, the editor of the online magazine *pixelpress.org*, is at work on a biography of David "Chim" Seymour. She is a consultant on Marco Bischof's forthcoming film about Chim, as well as on Trisha Ziff's film on Robert Capa's "Mexican Suitcase." A volume of Naggar's poetry, *Exils*, is forthcoming.

**STEPHEN W. NICHOLAS** is the dean for admissions at the College of Physicians & Surgeons at Columbia University, where he is also a professor of pediatrics and public health.

**LUCIA NIMCOVA**, originally from Humenné, Slovakia, studied at the Institute of Creative Photography Opava, Czech Republic, and at the Rijksakademie Van Beeldende Kunsten in Amsterdam. She has received numerous awards, including the ECB Photography Award and the Leica Oskar Barnack Award (both Germany); the Fotografia Baume and Mercier Award (Italy); and the Oskar Cepen Award (Slovakia).

**WILLY RONIS** (1910–2009), best known for his iconic black-and-white images of postwar, working-class Paris and southern France, died last year at the age of ninety-nine. The retrospective exhibition *Willy Ronis: Poetics of Engagement* was presented this year at the Monnaie de Paris.

**ELIZABETH RUBIN**, a contributing writer for the *New York Times Magazine*, has reported extensively on U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Her writings have also appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's*, *The New Republic*, *The New Yorker*, and many other publications. Rubin was a 2008–9 Edward R. Murrow Press Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations.

**BEN SLOAT** teaches photography and photo-history at the Art Institute of Boston at Lesley University, and was a 2009 Faculty Fulbright Scholar in Taiwan. In the past year, he has had solo exhibitions at ACC Gallery in Taipei, Front Gallery in Oakland, 126 Gallery in Galway, Ireland, and at the Steven Zevitas Gallery in Boston.

Ronis: photograph by Patrick Zachmann (1992), courtesy the artist/Magnum Photos; Keaney: photograph by eX de Medio; Addario and Rubin: photograph by Nisar Karimzai; Azoulay: photograph by Ivona Hedin

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# STATE OF EXCEPTION

CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY  
FROM TAIWAN

BY BEN SLOAT

When asked in an interview to comment on being an artist in Taiwan, the photographer and filmmaker Chieh-Jen Chen says:

*Taiwan is a state of exception; it isn't considered a country by the international community, yet has its own democratically elected government. Once when my work was exhibited in Shanghai, the label next to the artwork said I was from "Taipei, China." Later the label was changed to "Taiwan" by a museum visitor, then changed to "China," and then changed several times again. In the end, the label was covered with traces of this dispute over nationality. . . . Being a Taiwanese artist is the same as being a person without a clear national identity, but I don't think this is necessarily negative. At least this often makes me aware of my marginal status, and allows me to consider many different issues.*

The "state of exception" Chen describes in Taiwan reflects the complexity of the island nation's recent history and contemporary context. The majority of the population is descended from emigrants from China's Fujian Province hundreds of years ago; these people consider themselves to be ethnically Taiwanese. World War II brought an end to a half-century-long colonial period under the Japanese, after which Taiwan fell under the rule of Chiang Kai-shek and the Kuomintang (KMT). After a defeat by the Communists in the Chinese Civil War, the KMT fled to Taiwan, and hostilities began with the People's Republic of China (PRC) over Taiwan's sovereignty. In 1971 the KMT lost its seat at the United Nations—and formal relations with nearly the entire world community—to the PRC. The KMT's one-party rule, which would remain unaltered in Taiwan until the 1990s, included four decades of political suppression and martial law—from 1949 to 1987—known as the period of White Terror.



Works by contemporary Taiwanese photographers who came of age during that period of martial law reveal an unmistakable tension between the concept of the individual and his or her presumed role in society. Magnum photographer Chien-Chi Chang sees a "Taiwanese way of survival, given the influences and the factors. Things I don't see elsewhere—it's not just in the arts and culture, it's everywhere, but it's hard to define."

This sense of survival is clearly seen in *The Chain* (2004), Chang's series of portraits of inmates at Long Fa Tang, a temple-turned-mental-institution in southern Taiwan. The "treatment" at Long Fa Tang consists of binding a light chain around the waists of two





patients, one severely mentally disabled, the other more stable. No medication or formal therapies are administered, and the patients spend their time tending to the largest chicken farm in Taiwan, effectively working as indentured servants. The four dozen portraits in *The Chain* are poignant, tragic, and utterly startling. The patients here are clearly traumatized, and the closely cropped portraits re-emphasize their confinement. Nameless and anonymous, each struggles physically against the boundaries of an undetermined normalcy and against the spectacle of being seen. Chang parallels the physical chain of the Long Fa Tang patients with that of societal pressures in Taiwan: "There's always this visible chain and this invisible chain," he says. "The invisible chain could be a ritual . . . a bondage, an obligation."

With a cultural system founded on the Confucian tenets of personal propriety and filial piety, the "invisible chain" extends to multiple aspects of Taiwanese society. Responding to pressure from his family to get married, Chang has published two books about the institution of marriage in Taiwan. *I Do I Do I Do* (Ivy Liu/Premiere Foundation, 2002) is a humorous look at the emotions and absurdities surrounding the formal wedding process, while *Double Happiness* (Aperture, 2005) is a sobering examination of Taiwanese men taking foreign brides from South Asia in brokered marriages. A subtext to the latter book is the assumed demand for a traditional (and sexist) model of marriage that is unappealing to many modern Taiwanese women.

Conversely, the significance of filial piety and ancestor reverence is explored in *Family Parade* (1995–96), Shun-Chu Chen's series of family photographs covering the exterior of a ruined family home. On the experience of family images as vessels for nostalgia as well as for the location of self, Chen reflects: "When there is a fear of death, I feel some sort of salvation from these memories, these images."

While the prisoners of Chang's *Chain* evince the complete loss of identity in the midst of an institutional bondage, Chen associates the rituals and bonds of family as the site of personal renewal. Covering

**PAGE 52: Shun-Chu Chen, from *Condolence Series A*, 2007; PAGE 53: Chien-Chi Chang, *Mental patients*, Long Fa Tang Temple, Kaohsiung, 1998; RIGHT: Shun-Chu Chen, *Family Parade*, 1995–6.**

Chen: both images courtesy Chi Wen Gallery, Taipei; Chang: courtesy the artist/Chi Wen Gallery, Taipei/Magnum Photos









a large family tomb with grids of photographs of plastic flowers in *Flower Ritual* (2001), Chen employs the glossy permanence of both the fake flower and the photograph itself, twin mechanisms that seem to defy the fact of death.

Another layer of Taiwan's recent history has been its rapid economic growth, known as the "Taiwan Miracle," which has helped to propel the country from an agrarian society to one of high-tech industry. In this regard, Taiwan is aligned with Hong Kong, Singapore, and South Korea—known together as the "Four Asian Tigers"—each with highly developed economies as a result of massive industrialization between the 1960s and 1990s. The embrace of technology and development has had manifold effects on the Taiwanese imagination, on one hand enhancing the country's global status as an economic force (despite its political state of exception), but also creating massive cultural transformations that potentially discard the past.

Jui-Chung Yao describes aspects of his work as preserving elements of culture from "the inhalation of the black hole of history." Reflecting on the recent political past, images from his 2007 series *Liberation of Taiwan* are modeled after military propaganda posters. Here the artist poses as a Red Army soldier, floating above various Taiwanese landmarks: a pointed remark about China's ongoing influence over his country. In an interview, Yao states: "Being a Taiwanese artist . . . it is impossible for me to depart, in reality or in historical perspective, from the West or China. Though it is kind of fatalistic to say so, the destiny of Taiwan is inevitably connected with these two immense powers."

Yao turns his attention to industrialization with *Roaming around the Ruins* (1991–2005), a collection of four photographic projects in which the camera functions as a historical witness to Taiwan's changing visual fabric. Abandoned factory buildings appear as desolate and grand in one of these four parts, *The Civilization Built by Skeleton*: vestiges of Taiwan's initial thrust into the global economy through low-level manufacturing. Another of the component projects, *Gods & Idols Surround the Border*, presents a collection of Taoist and Buddhist relics and animist idols that comprise the visual landscape of religion in Taiwan. Of this work Yao states: "I was trying to deliver a kind of illusion [that] originated from the local Taiwanese spirit."

A parallel illusion can be seen in the high-paced lifestyle of Taiwan's ultramodern cities, whose complex cultural layering Chien-Chi Chang has described as "like a double exposure, sometimes a triple exposure. Things I don't expect, they co-exist right next to each other."

Confronting the urban lifestyle of contemporary Taiwan, I-Chen Kuo's *Lose Contact* (2006) begins with the camera facing downward at street level as the artist traverses a busy crosswalk in Taipei. Attached to a balloon, the camera suddenly rises to the level of

rooftops as it journeys skyward. As whole neighborhoods are eventually visible, the image transmission of the camera begins to decline, eventually becoming an abstraction until only static is seen and the camera is lost. Kuo's gesture may be viewed in multiple ways: as a mode of surveillance; as an exploration of the urban surroundings, from close-up to distanced; as a reformatted image of landscape in the digital age; and as a meditation on the uses, limits, and disposability of technological practice.

Perhaps the most internationally recognized Taiwanese artist is Chieh-Jen Chen, who has worked for three decades in photography and film, with a focus on those aspects of history, power, technology, and identity that have affected Taiwan as a whole. Early Chen photographs were based on historic images of torture taken by Westerners; the artist digitally removed the prisoners and inserted multiples of himself being decapitated, chained, or bound in a cage. This act serves as a reversal of authority, erasing the subject of torture and the camera's gaze, and turning it instead onto the perpetrators.

Chen's interest in photography comes from its history in the region:

*In the mid '90s, I was interested in how non-Western regions were photographed, and how these regions, as objects of Western photography's gaze, were admitted into the history of photography. The most extreme example was Westerners photographing torture in the East. . . . These victims of torture had no choice but to become the photographed. In their dying moments, they couldn't escape the prying gaze of the camera, and so these images were forever frozen in photographic medium. . . . For a period of time, I focused on how to use a computer to thaw these frozen images of torture, and the possibility of their re-narration. It presents the East's experience of injury and reflects the West's history of colonization.*

One particular photograph of *lingchi* (a punishment in imperial China, also known as "death by a thousand cuts"), shot by a French soldier in 1904 and made famous by French philosopher Georges Bataille in his book *Les Larmes d'Eros* (*The Tears of Eros*; 1961), depicts a victim bound to a post in the middle of a crowd. As he looks skyward in an opium-induced delirium, two large wounds on his torso reveal his inner chest cavity while his executioners continue to slice his body. Framing the original image as a "swirling tempest sweeping us into complex viewing rites and power issues," Chen's 2002 film *Lingchi: Echoes of a Historical Photograph* restages the

**OPPOSITE, TOP:** Jui-Chung Yao, *Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall*, from the series *Liberation of Taiwan*, 2007; **BOTTOM:** I-Chen Kuo, *Lose Contact (night)*, 2007.

Yao: courtesy the artist/Chi Wen Gallery, Taipei; Kuo: courtesy the artist








original scene with actors, his slow-moving camera scrutinizing the multiple parties involved. The executioners methodically sharpen their knives, the weary prisoner is force-fed a liquid opiate, a heavy rain begins to fall on the silent crowd. Most disarming is the camera's point of view, not a passive observer but an active accomplice to the unfolding historical violence. Stunted and powerless, the camera looks upon the scene with both incrimination and guilt.

Distilling the theme of the individual in relationship to a surrounding power that defines him (rather like a small country at the mercy of larger ones that define its political world), Chen snuck into shuttered industrial sites to make his films *Factory* (2003) and *Bade Area* (2005). For *Factory*, Chen invited laid-off garment workers he met during the making of *Lingchi* to return to their former site of employment, filming them enacting the daily rituals of their previous occupation over a full workweek. As they interact with the now-abandoned machinery and objects of industry, their simulated labor becomes a gesture of defiance against their economic exploitation. In contrast, the isolated temporary workers shown in *Bade Area* scrounge slowly and deliberately, working aimlessly in the derelict buildings of a once-idealized industrial locale.

Chen's more recent films engage the various political conditions that have come to define Taiwan. *Military Court and Prison* (2007–8) looks at the unseen locations that held political prisoners during Taiwan's White Terror. *Empire's Borders* (2008–9), meanwhile, looks at the disempowerment of Taiwanese applying for American visas and at the current subjugation of Chinese and Southeast Asian brides attempting to enter Taiwan.

Chen says: "Everyone views other cultures through their own cultural bias, not only Westerners. . . . The process of exchange between cultures often starts from mutual misunderstanding, but this misunderstanding is also the starting point for communication." 

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**Chieh-Jen Chen, installation photograph of *Lingchi: Echoes of a Historical Photograph*, 2002, on view at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, three-channel DVD projection.**

Courtesy the artist/Chi Wen Gallery, Taipei





