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The City in the Mist:  
Imagining Shanghai in Yang Yongliang's *Phantom Landscapes*

Avani Sastry

Many of Yang Yongliang's landscapes are illusions – from a distance, they resemble traditional Chinese ink landscape paintings, albeit enlarged and edited, but close inspection reveals mountains composed of looming high-rises, coastlines of accumulated debris, and birds replaced by construction cranes (Figure 1). In *Phantom Landscape III – Forbidden City* (2007), Yang undermines the illusion he establishes in other works in the series, stopping the viewer from reading the landscape as a historic painting (Figure 2). He still evokes the conventions of *shanshuihua* (“mountain-and-water”) ink paintings, such as the heavy use of mist, the rising skyscrapers that evoke cascading mountains, and the inclusion of seals and colophons. However, the landscape is obstructed by traffic signs that emerge from the mist. They are impossibly large and eclipse cars, telephone wires, and building complexes. The traffic signs also interrupt the multiple ways to navigate the space of *Phantom Landscape III- Forbidden City*. When regarding smaller fragments of the city, one can try to make sense out of its familiar logic, recognizing narrow streets that vanish in the distance or the sight of skyscrapers looming high above. On a compositional level, the work contains enough elements of *shanshuihua* painting to be recognizable, and one can see how urban structures coagulate and form hills and valleys, mountains and streams. Yet, the traffic signs disrupt both the individual vignettes of urban life and the larger impression of a fantastical landscape. The signs confront the viewer, making clear the inherent artifice of this impossible scene.

In his work on urbanization and Chinese photography, Jiang Jiehong considers the implications of constant environmental transformation for contemporary Chinese art, especially

regarding the function and veracity of photography. He notes how neighborhoods and old buildings in Chinese cities are being torn down and rebuilt so rapidly that artists face significant issues in representing the city. Jiang asks,

As daily changes are experienced as part of urban existence, what does China really look like, and what are the relationships between photographically recorded ‘facts’ and the instability of what has been seen; between artistic response, imagination and memory?<sup>1</sup>

In his *Phantom Landscape* series, Yang demonstrates one approach to contending with these rapid transformations by representing the city through montage. These landscapes are composites of Yang’s photographs of Shanghai, digitally edited together to resemble *shanshuihua* paintings.<sup>2</sup> Yang’s digital photomontages undermine the authority of the individual photograph, instead using fragments of many decontextualized images to characterize the discordance, alienation, and violence produced by rapid urbanization. Yang’s *Phantom Landscapes* are constructed images of a city that exists in the uncanny space between real and unreal, imagination and memory.

### **I. Transforming *Shanshuihua* in *Phantom Landscape 1 – No. 1***

While Yang works primarily with photography, he was trained in traditional Chinese painting, supplemented with philosophy, aesthetics, and art criticism. After completing his art education, Yang studied commercial graphic design and attempted to work as a graphic designer before pursuing a career as an artist.<sup>3</sup> In his photography, Yang incorporates the forms and symbols of traditional painting with the methods of graphic design and new media. Drawing on

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<sup>1</sup> Jiang Jiehong, “The Transient City: Urban Transformation in Chinese Contemporary Photography” in *Visual Arts, Representations and Interventions in Contemporary China: Urbanized Interfaces*, ed. Valjakka Minna and Meiqin Wang. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 92.

<sup>2</sup> Alexandra Mickle, “Art Beyond the Generic City: Yang Yongliang’s Photo Composites 2007-2012” (Master’s thesis, University of Oregon, 2016), 4.

<sup>3</sup> Wang Meiqin, *Urbanization and Contemporary Chinese Art* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 128.

Confucian and Taoist ideals, landscape paintings could function as expressions of philosophical or personal beliefs. Scholar-bureaucrats depicted a world where they lived harmoniously with nature and did not attempt to subjugate or suppress it.<sup>4</sup> When landscape paintings included human figures, they were typically small in comparison to the vast landscape, acting as wanderers who are learning from the beauty of the natural world. These idealized nature scenes also allow space for the movement of *qi*, or the vital energy that flows through the universe.<sup>5</sup> They are simultaneously informed by human beliefs and desires but portray worlds untouched by human hands. Of course, the ideal of untouched, harmonious nature was often at odds with the large-scale construction projects undertaken by governments throughout Chinese history, so landscape paintings likely express more of a nostalgic ideal rather than a genuine representation of historic interactions with nature.<sup>6</sup> *Shanshuihua* paintings should not be regarded as an easy representation of the relationship between scholar-bureaucrats and nature, but rather as thoughtful idealizations that incorporated both conventions and individual temperaments, interests, political goals, and/or philosophical contentions.

Ming Dynasty painter Shen Zhou painted *Lofty Mount Lu* (1467) as a tribute to his teacher, using the strength and impressiveness of the mountain as metaphors for his teacher's virtues (Figure 3).<sup>7</sup> In *Phantom Landscape No. 1-1*, Yang recreates *Lofty Mountain Lu* through photomontage (Figure 4). Yang's interpretation of the painting eradicates the eclecticism and personality that Shen was known for, reimagining the unique natural formations of the mountain

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<sup>4</sup> Chu Kiu-Wai, "Constructing Ruins: New Urban Aesthetics in Chinese Art and Cinema." In *Modern Art Asia: Selected Papers Issues 1-8*, ed. by Majella Munro, (Cambridge: Enzo Arts and Publishing, 2012), 197.

<sup>5</sup> Mickle, "Art Beyond the Generic City," 11.

<sup>6</sup> Chang Tan, "Landscape without nature: Ecological reflections in contemporary Chinese art." *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 3, no. 3 (2016): 225.

<sup>7</sup> Richard M. Barnhart, "The Five Dynasties of the Song Period (907-1279)" in *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting*, ed. Richard Barnhart et. al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 217.

as identical high-rises. While the blank space of Shen's original implies moving water, the white mist of Yang's version has an eerie, surreal character, evoking the thick smog that pervades cities like Shanghai. Even the inscriptions and seals are transformed; starting in the Song Dynasty, artists inscribed poems and added seals to fill space, enhance a painting, and guard against forgery. In *Phantom Landscape I – No. 1*, the inscriptions are random website addresses, and the seals are manhole covers. While Shen's writes the poem with the elegant calligraphy of an educated person, Yang's website addresses are written in a mechanical and uniform script. This depersonalization of the inscription, void of the painter's own personality, evokes the alienation and anonymization of urban life.

Yang's transformation of *Lofty Mount Lu* speaks to the alienating effects of urban experience globally, but also his specific experiences witnessing the cycles of demolition and construction in Shanghai. He was born in the town of Jiading near Shanghai, later incorporated into the city as Jiading District. After the town was incorporated, historic sites were torn down, apartment complexes and commercial structures went up, and the new buildings featured facsimiles of historic sites meant to appeal to tourists by replicating historic Chinese aesthetics.<sup>8</sup> Yang's ironic mimicry of *Lofty Mount Lu* replicates these processes of destruction, construction, and mimicry, the replacement of tradition with ersatz approximations. At first glance, the parallels between the compositions of *Phantom Landscape I – No. 1* echoes *Lofty Mount Lu* are apparent, as the gradations of light and dark buildings in Yang's photomontage mimic the dramatic contrasts in Shen Zhou's painting. However, the fluidity of *Lofty Mount Lu*'s composition relies on fluidity, as the natural forms in the upper and lower halves of the composition are connected. Yang severs this connection, instead contrasting the pristine, uniform

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<sup>8</sup> Wang, *Urbanization and Contemporary Chinese Art*, 123

towers of the upper half and the squat buildings below that threaten to slip into the mist at any moment.

## II. *Phantom Landscapes n°07* and the Strategies of Photomontage

While scholars like Chang Tan and Chu Kiu-Wai have elucidated the critical implications of Yang's landscapes – namely, the critique inherent in reimagining *shanshuihua* paintings as urban ruins and skyscrapers – few have focused on his methods. Yang's photomontages stand within a larger tradition of pastiche – of collage, montage, assemblage – that is significant to both European and Chinese critiques of urban life. Artists of the interwar period, including European Dadaists and Chinese satirists, used photomontage to represent the violence, allure, and sensations of urban life, and criticize both politics and the apparent objectivity of the photograph. Yang's use of photomontage continues this critical tradition while incorporating new technologies to better characterize the nature of urbanization in contemporary Shanghai.

In interwar Europe, Dada artists like Tristan Tzara, Raoul Hausmann, and George Grosz created shocking collages that critiqued social, political, and artistic conventions. One Dada artist, Berlin-based Hannah Hoch, pioneered the use of photomontage to represent and critique urban experience. *Cut with the Kitchen Knife Dada Through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch of Germany* (1919-1920) includes a dizzying array of newspaper clippings, famous politicians and figures in the art world, disjoined typography, the large crowds and looming buildings of the city, and the wheels, gears, and trappings of machinery, the technological advances that made World War 1 possible (Figure 5).

In his seminal essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin asserts that Dada artists destroy the “aura” (the authenticity, authority, tradition) of the

very works they create.<sup>9</sup> Andreas Huyssen builds on Benjamin's insight, establishing how Hoch's photomontages are not a celebration of photography, but a disappointment with the limitations of photography, and the need to represent what photography cannot.<sup>10</sup> *Cut with the Kitchen Knife Dada Through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch of Germany* attacks the idea of representation itself. Hoch eschews composition, perspective, coherence – all images are rendered as fragments, exposed in their artifice and flatness. The act of cutting, rearranging, pasting exposes the limitations of these images, and deconstructing the supposed advances and pleasures of modern life.

About fifteen years after Hoch represented Weimar through collage, *Shidai manhua* (Modern Sketch) magazine released its first issue, which included a collage satirizing the spectacular excess of Shanghai (Figure 6). After the Opium Wars, Shanghai became a significant Treaty Port and site of a thriving press and humor magazines, including the cartoon magazine *Shidai manhua*, which heavily drew on foreign influences, including American and British humor magazines.<sup>11</sup> Like the Dada group, the artists of *Shidai manhua* were blatantly anti-fascist – the first issue included Ye Qianyu's *The New Lines of Battle?* (1934), an expressive print that shows Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler in shared salute with – and obscuring the face of – a man in traditional Chinese garments (Figure 7).<sup>12</sup> The magazine also included a collage labelled *Shanghai fenjing* ("Shanghai landscape") (1934). This metaphorical "landscape" contains similar elements to Hoch's imagination of Berlin life – the fragmented, disjointed bodies, the

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<sup>9</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." In *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 524.

<sup>10</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *Miniature Metropolis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 160-161.

<sup>11</sup> Martina Caschera. "Chinese Modern Cartoon. A Transcultural Approach to Modern Sketch." *Altre Modernita* 19, (2018): 85-90.

<sup>12</sup> John A. Crespi, "China's *Modern Sketch* – 1: The Golden Era of Cartoon Art, 1934-1937," MIT Visualizing Cultures, accessed November 13, 2020, [https://visualizingcultures.mit.edu/modern\\_sketch/ms\\_essay\\_01.pdf](https://visualizingcultures.mit.edu/modern_sketch/ms_essay_01.pdf): 21.

anonymous, sexualized women, the focus on amplifying or obscuring eyes, the tilted and inverted bodies that create a sense of movement, like a swirling whirlpool of intoxication and excess. While Hoch locates urban life in the mass media photography, this landscape locates the city in sensation – gambling, liquor, sex. William Schaefer notes the “representational violence” generated symbolically (the held gun, the Sikh policeman) and methodologically (the physical cutting and manipulation of bodies), two methods of conveying the danger and vice of interwar Shanghai.<sup>13</sup>

*Cut with the Kitchen Knife Dada Through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch of Germany* and *Shanghai fenjing* illustrate how interwar artists cut, fragment, manipulate, and recombine photography to evoke the sensations and trappings of the city, incorporating the advent of new technologies and the looming shadows of violence and war. In his *Phantom Landscape* series, Yang responds to the violent transformations of his own lifetime. China’s urbanization is the largest construction project in Earth’s history, a massive undertaking based on authoritarian power, the violent eviction of residents, and the exploitation of migrant workers.<sup>14</sup> As of 2011, over 200 million Chinese people are part of the “floating population,” or people from rural areas who travel to cities like Beijing, Shanghai, or Guangzhou for work. Due to the *hukou* or household registration system, they are denied access to urban social services like childcare, medical facilities, and some jobs even though their labor makes China’s urbanization possible.<sup>15</sup> This tragic irony is encapsulated in Wang Jin’s *100%*, which depicts migrant laborers

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<sup>13</sup> William Schaefer, *Shadow Modernism: Photography, Writing, and Space in Shanghai, 1925-1937* (London: Duke University Press, 2017), 145.

<sup>14</sup> Maurizio Marinelli, “Urban Revolution and Chinese contemporary art: A total revolution of the sense”, *China Information* 29, no. 2, (2015), 155.

<sup>15</sup> Yunnan Ding and Nick Schuermans, “‘Happiness Hefei’: public art and rural–urban citizenship struggles in transitional China”, *Social & Cultural Geography* 13, no. 7, (2012), 719-720.



holding up a highway with their own bodies, making their labor visible and illustrating the exploitation that undergirds advancement (Figure 8).<sup>16</sup>

While the strength of Wang Jin's critique lies in representation, in making overlooked bodies visible, Yang critiques through omission, through the noticeable lack of people in cities that should be teeming with crowds. Despite his omission of actual bodies, Yang's *Phantom Landscapes* are replete with the products of human intervention, including human destruction. *Phantom Landscapes n°07* (2007) emphasizes this destruction – the foreground is composed of dirt and detritus, and a pile of broken building materials lies haphazardly on the right side of the composite (Figure 9). A miniscule bicycle, missing a rider, stands on a patch of cement in front of dirtied, damaged buildings. The scene is framed by misty white which also pervades the midground, but several key elements – the telephone poles, whose wires extend nowhere, the crumbles, and the smaller buildings are all rendered sharply, easily discerned and richly dark, while the skyscrapers in the background are much hazier, transparent, and compressed in space, a phantasm rather than a real space accessible to the denizens of the foreground of this work.

Following Marcus Boon's contention that the fragments of a montage act as metonyms, the spaces of Yang's work can be read as representations of the people who build them, who live there, and who both produce and are subjected to the violences of construction and demolition.<sup>17</sup> *Phantom Landscapes n°07* is defined by disconnection, both in severing of the telephone wires and the jarring contrast between the exacting detail of the foreground and the ethereal background. Though Yang does not employ the same methods as Hoch or the artists of *Shidai manhua*, he still draws on this tradition of using montage to represent what is otherwise

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<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth Parke, "Migrant workers and the imaging of human infrastructure in Chinese contemporary art", *China Information* 29, no. 2 (2015): 236.

<sup>17</sup> Marcus Boon, *In Praise of Copying* (London and Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 145.

unrepresentable, of attacking the veracity of the image, the validity of representing the city as exclusively the ideals of progress or the ruins of tradition. Furthermore, Yang also utilizes shock in his critique, though his shock is derived from misrecognition – the initial impression of a *shanshuihua* landscape compared with the reality of the image. In his utilization of shock, of unexpected juxtapositions, of creating unreal spaces from disconnected fragments, Yang continues the critical tradition of photomontage evident in *Cut with the Kitchen Knife Dada Through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch of Germany* and *Shanghai fenjing*.

Yet, there is one significant difference between how Dada artists and *Shidai manhua* artists created their photomontages, and how Yang creates his – Yang works completely digitally. *Cut with the Kitchen Knife Dada Through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch of Germany* and *Shanghai fenjing* have a tactile, textural quality. The fragments have distinct edges that reveal the processes of cutting and pasting, a sense of dimension and weight, and clearly delineated boundaries that disappear in Yang's mist. The physicality of these images reinforces their sensorial elements, especially in *Shanghai fenjing*, with its emphasis on the sensorial elements of the city, as it evokes sex, violence, intoxication. While the physical manipulation of photographs represents the excesses of modern urbanism in interwar Shanghai and Berlin, the intangibility and ambiguity of Yang's landscapes represents the postmodernism of contemporary Shanghai.

### **III. *Phantom Landscapes as Post-Photography***

While artists like Hannah Hoch attacked the objectivity of the photograph as early as 1919, the advent of digital photography provided new challenges for determining the veracity of a photograph. Kevin Robins coined the term “post-photography” to describe how digital photographs undermine the supposed objectivity of chemical photography, as digital photographs

can be manipulated with much higher levels of sophistication, and no longer take physical form or have to represent real things. Robins characterizes digital photographs as a kind of “image-information,” as images can contain information not immediately accessible to the eye through enlargement, manipulation, and deconstruction.<sup>18</sup>

Yang’s work is entirely digital, which allows him to control minute details and work on a large scale, with an ease that his predecessors could not have anticipated. For example, *Phantom Landscape II – No. 3* (2007) is approximately two by nine feet, a forebodingly large work that engenders the illusion of a landscape painting because it can be viewed from a distance (Figure 10). While there are many practical reasons for Yang’s use of digital photomontage, there are also intriguing theoretical implications. After digital manipulation, Yang’s photographs lose their origins and their boundaries, and thus lose the palpable contrast evident in historic photomontage. Yang’s landscapes have the detail and specificity of real, recognizable places, yet form impossible scenes, no longer representing physical space but the experience of a city constantly in transition. Yang formulates his experiences of Shanghai not in the physical sensation of *Shanghai fenjing*, but in the buildings disappearing into mist, in the spaces of ambiguity, of loss. The collapsing boundaries between real and imagined space create what Jiang describes as “the instability of what has been seen.”

Post-photography also challenges the idea that a camera is comparable to the human eye; Mark Hansen distinguishes between the *machinic* form of perception, mere sight, and the *human* form of perception, an embodied, affective form of seeing. People do not passively see their environment, but construct their perception informed by experience, a process more comparable

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<sup>18</sup> Kevin Robins, “The virtual unconscious in post-photography,” *Science as Culture*, 3., no. 1 (1992), 100-102.

to a computer, with its capacity to process information.<sup>19</sup> When Yang creates his representations of Shanghai, he constructs the city from historical memory and fragments of dozens of sites, producing impressions of places that may no longer exist but have emotional resonance. Digital manipulation allows Yang to build landscapes that evoke the complexities of experiencing a place beyond the limitations of the camera. Yang's digital landscapes contain enough detail and specificity to feel real without being limited by the challenges of literally representing a transforming city.

#### IV. Conclusion

Yang Yongliang's *Phantom Landscapes* series addresses the challenges of representing Shanghai when the city is constantly in transition due to the demands of rapid urbanization. Through his invocation of historic ink painting, Yang elucidates how urbanization impacts the psyche of the city resident, replacing the idealization of *shanshuihua* with the reality of demolition and new ruins. His use of photomontage also continues a twentieth-century tradition of questioning the supposed empiricism of the photograph and highlighting the violences of urban life through the symbolic violence of fragmenting and manipulating images. However, Yang updates photomontage for the present-day by using digital tools, which allows him to create work with an unprecedented level of detail and scale, creating scenes that are simultaneously familiar and imagined. Yang's imagined worlds represent Shanghai in ways that unedited photographs are unable because his landscapes forego literal representation. Instead, Yang evokes the disorienting cycles of demolition, construction, and expansion, critiquing the destruction and exploitation that underpins the new China Dream.

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<sup>19</sup> Mark B. N. Hansen. "Seeing with the Body: The Digital Image in Postphotography." *Diacritics* 31, no. 4 (2001): 61-65.

## Appendix

Figure 1. *Phantom Landscape II – No. 1*, Yang Yongliang, 2007. Han Epson UltraGiclée print on Epson fine art paper. Reproduced from

<https://www.yangyongliang.com/phantom-landscape/6ag07qz3nw4lqsghm4u7a4z3s4sr5y>.



Figure 2. *Phantom Landscape III – Forbidden City*, Yang Yongliang, 2007. Digital pictures, inkjet print on paper. Reproduced from

<https://www.yangyongliang.com/phantom-landscape/6ag07qz3nw4lqsghm4u7a4z3s4sr5y>.



Figure 3. *Lofty Mountain Lu*, Shen Zhou, 1467. Hanging scroll, ink, and colors on paper.

Reproduced from [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lofty\\_Mt.Lu\\_by\\_Shen\\_Zhou.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lofty_Mt.Lu_by_Shen_Zhou.jpg).

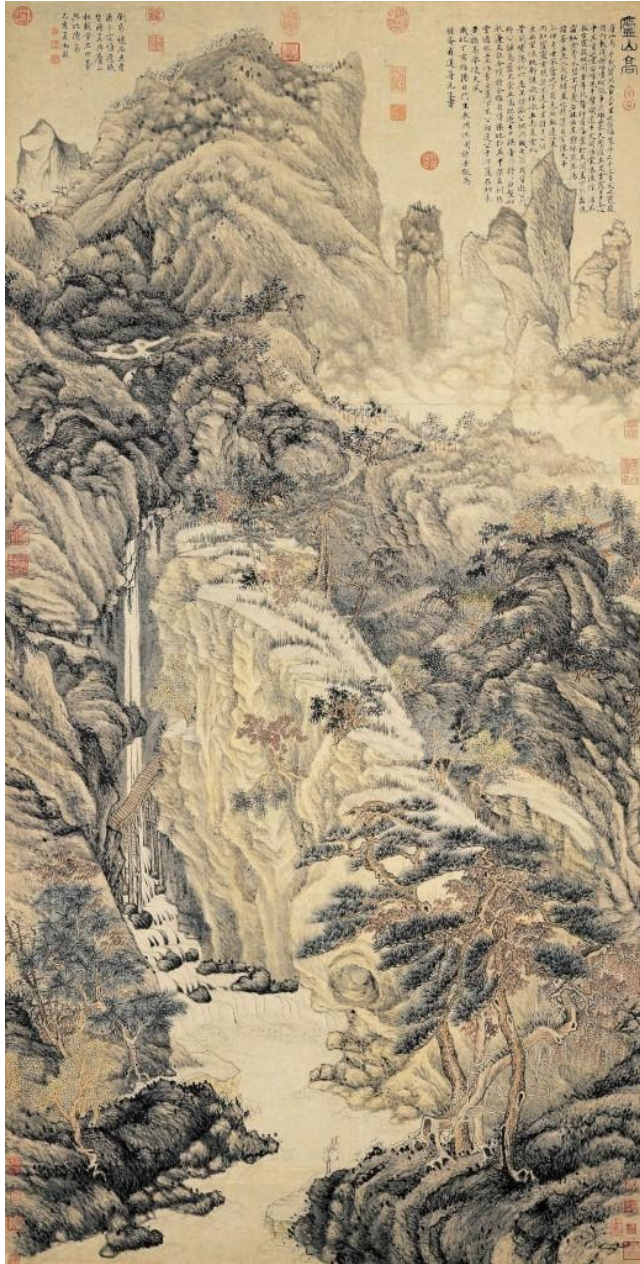




Figure 4. *Phantom Landscape I – No.1*, Yang Yongliang, 2006. Digital pictures, inkjet print on paper. Reproduced from

<https://www.yangyongliang.com/phantom-landscape/6ag07qz3nw4lqsghm4u7a4z3s4sr5y>.

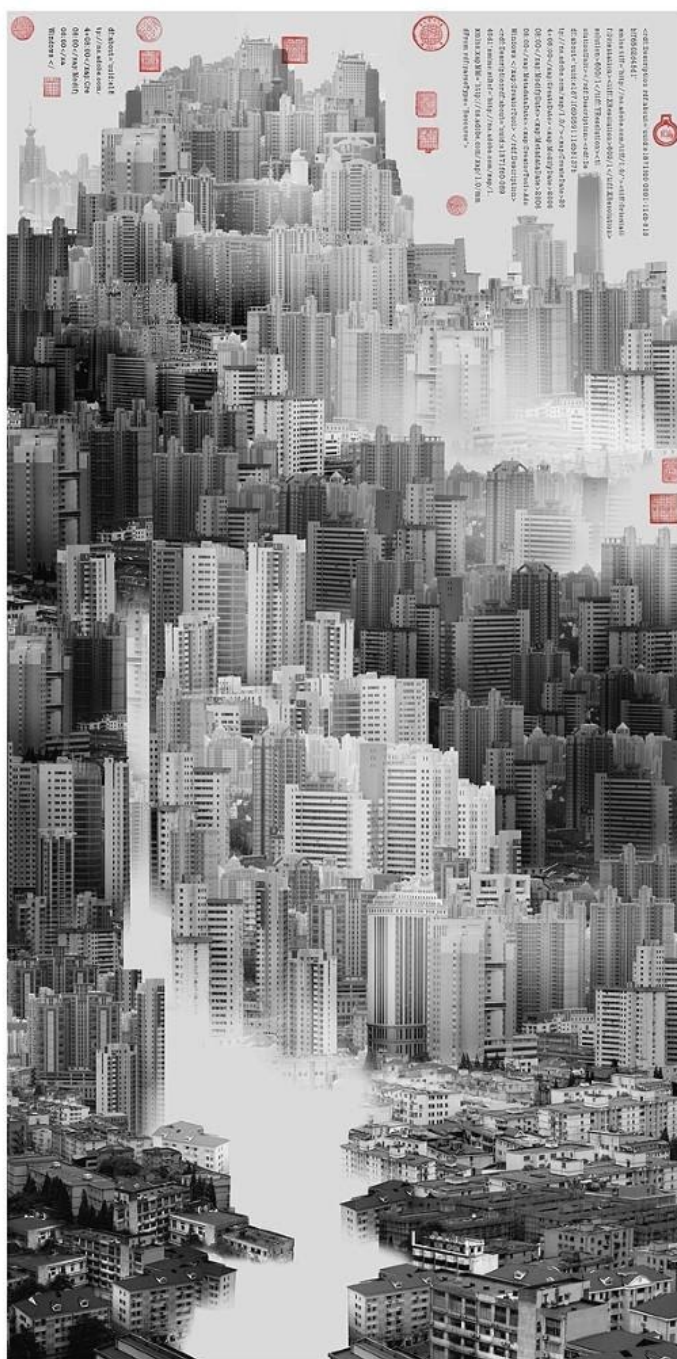


Figure 5. *Cut with the Kitchen Knife Dada Through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch of Germany*, Hannah Hoch, 1919-1920. Photomontage. Reproduced from ARTSTOR.





Figure 6. *Shanghai fenjing* [Shanghai landscape], *Shidai manhua* [Modern Sketch] 1, 1934.

Photomontage. Reproduced from

[https://visualizingcultures.mit.edu/modern\\_sketch\\_03/01/images/ms01\\_023\\_ModernSketch.jpg](https://visualizingcultures.mit.edu/modern_sketch_03/01/images/ms01_023_ModernSketch.jpg).

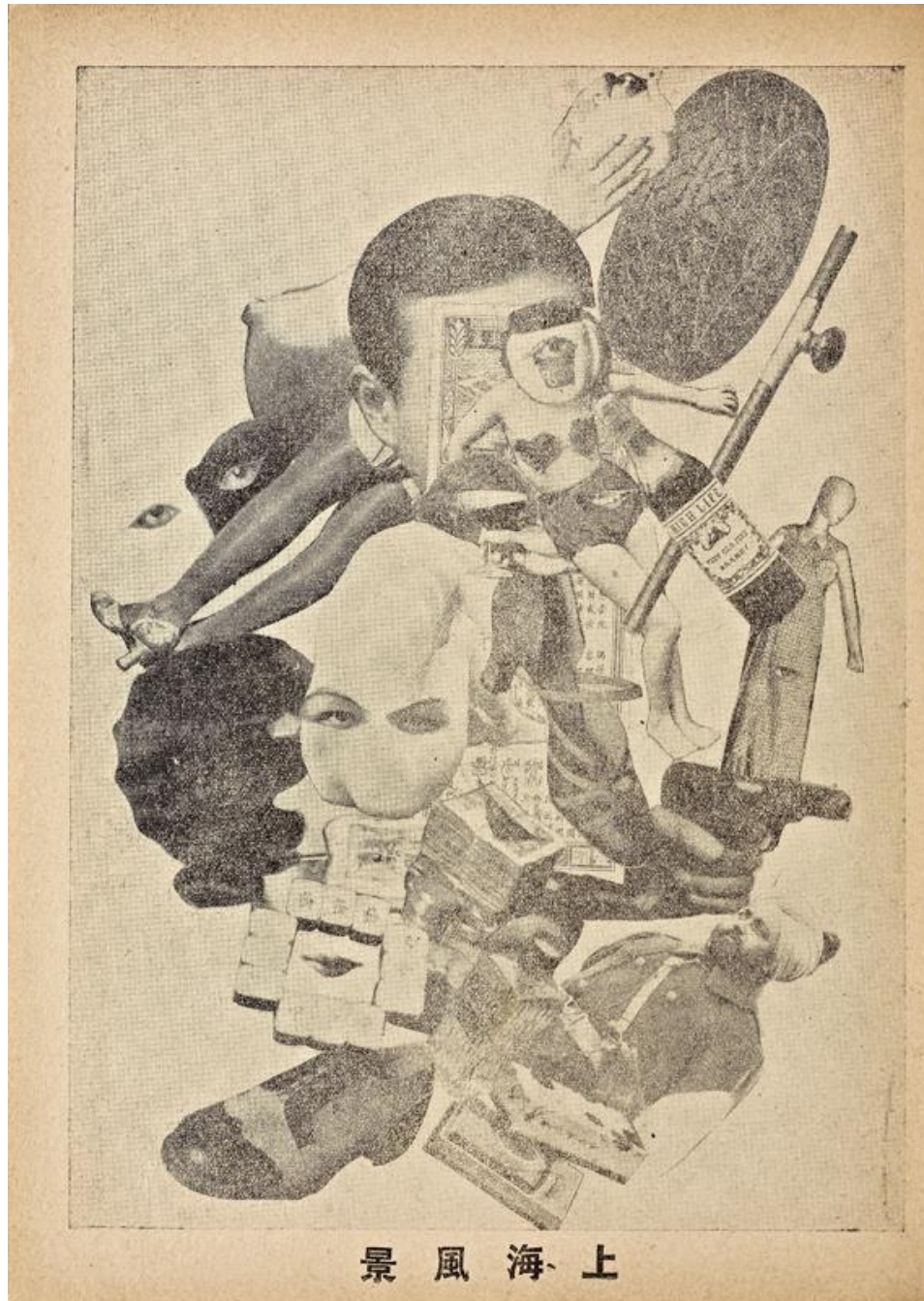


Figure 7. *The New Lines of Battle?*, Ye Qianyu, *Shidai manhua* [Modern Sketch] 1, 1934.

Reproduced from [https://visualizingcultures.mit.edu/modern\\_sketch\\_03/ms\\_gallery01.html](https://visualizingcultures.mit.edu/modern_sketch_03/ms_gallery01.html).





Figure 8. *100%*, Wang Jin, 1999. Chromogenic color print. Reproduced from <https://collections.mplus.org.hk/en/objects/100-2012988>.



Figure 9. *Phantom Landscapes n°07*, Yang Yongliang, 2007. Giclee print on fine art paper.

Reproduced from

<https://www.yangyongliang.com/phantom-landscape/r312kt44hygj8r09qdfuv0ahv9mn5i>.



Figure 10. *Phantom Landscape II – No. 3*, Yang Yongliang, 2007. Epson UltraGiclée print on Epson fine art paper. Reproduced from

<https://www.yangyongliang.com/phantom-landscape/r312kt44hygj8r09qdfuv0ahv9mn5i>.



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