

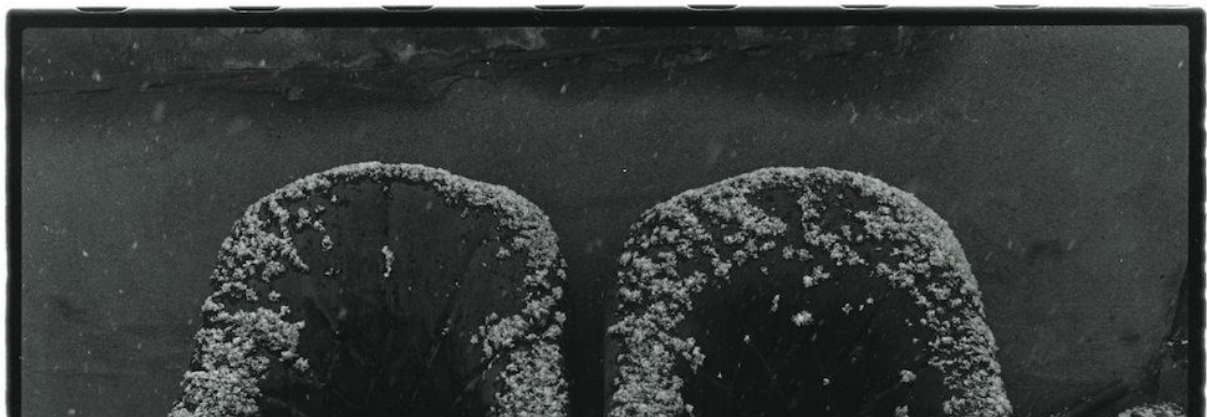
ART &amp; PHOTOGRAPHY

# RongRong's Diary

Oliver Eglin examines a new book on the subversive Chinese photographer RongRong, a frequent collaborator in the radical artistic community Beijing East Village



Life in 'The East Village'. Patches of snow brighten what is otherwise an unassuming dirt track. Littered with fragments of broken brick at its edges, a grey-fringed cloud of smog envelops the scene from above. In the foreground the limbless bust of a shop mannequin rests against a battered wall, her peaceful expression at odds with the ruinous surroundings.

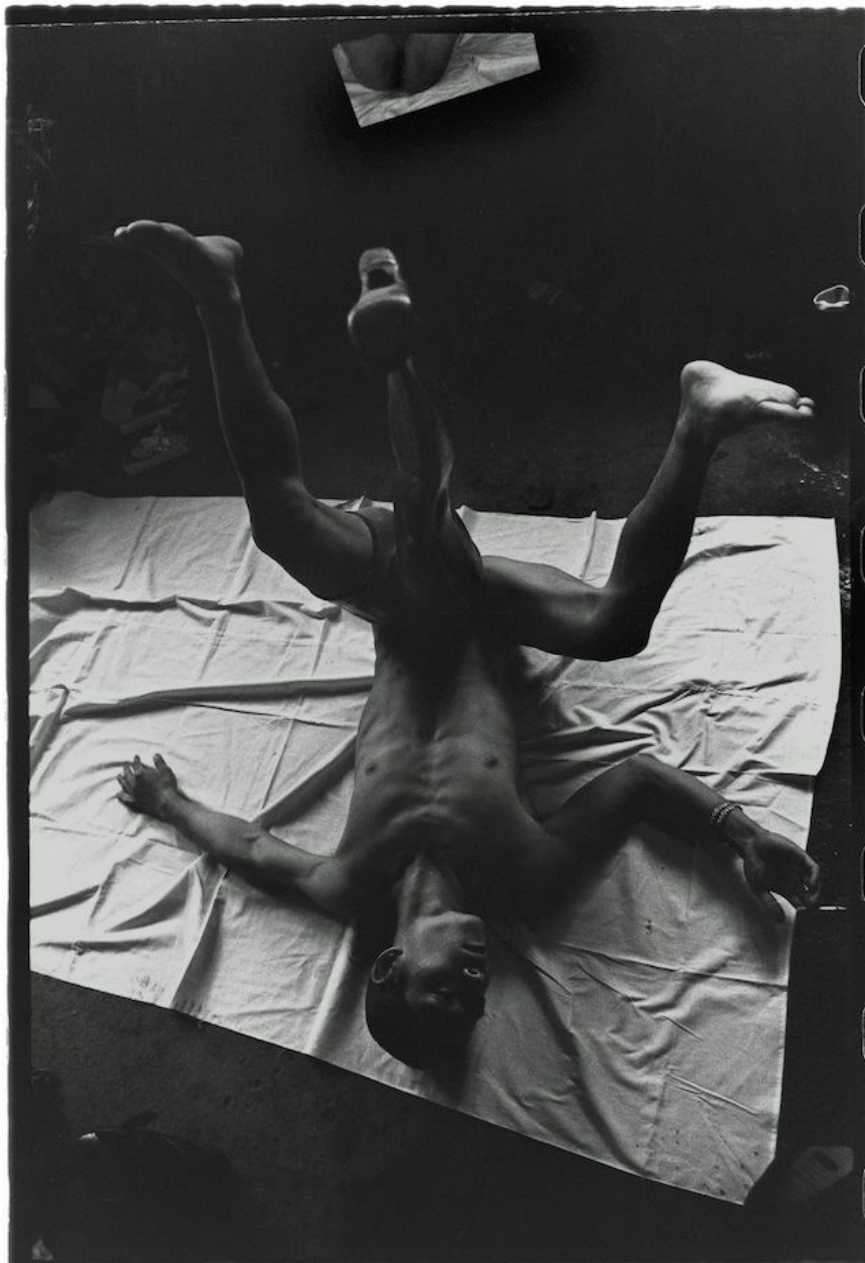




---

1993 No. 7, 1993

When in the early 90s a group of experimental performance artists began to form in an area of Beijing known locally as 'The East Village' they joined an existing population of binmen, construction workers and the unemployed. Set against a bombed-out landscape of unending rubble this atmosphere of abandonment seems to have galvanised the group. Works emerged organically, with their spontaneous and impulsive actions coming about through a cocktail of isolation, boredom and a burning desire for experimentation.



---

1993 No. 17 (Zhang)



As the photographer RongRong engaged himself within the scene, his inquisitive eye for the surreal helped to create performances that were more consciously focused on spectacle. The line between intention, chance or even accident is often blurred. One particular anecdote recounts the tale of RongRong's friend and collaborator Curse, who returns from a night of drinking with what looks like an intricate tribal tattoo across his face. It is in fact a burn that has occurred after an attempt to heat rice wine over a stove went horribly wrong and exploded in his face. Fortunately the scarring eases after a few days, but the inclusion of this image amongst the more deliberate acts of experiments on the body is telling.



1994 No. 83 (Zhu Ming),  
1994

As the book advances the group appear to take the work in a progressively more daring and at times shocking trajectory. When government officials and police start showing up to evict or incarcerate anyone found liaising with the group, RongRong and his friends go into hiding. The artist Zhang Huan is assaulted in a bar by strangers and RongRong rushes to visit him at his hospital bed. The impulse to record this episode is however unwavering, “silently I took out my camera, which felt as heavy as a stone.” These sombre portraits of his friend are a poignant intersection to the book. The artists’ work and life have become interchangeable and yet, in spite of the resistance they face, there is an underlying sense of optimism to the work.

*“Later, we left the hospital together. Zhang Huan put a hat on his head when we walked to the street. It is summer now and very hot in Beijing. With a bright white bandage under the hat he reminded me of Vincent Van Gogh.”*





Zhang Huan No. 2, 1994

After a period of short exile, the artists tentatively return to make new works. Ai Weiwei is an ever-present feature of the book, but it isn't until this later period where his presence is really felt. At one stage Weiwei summons RongRong to his apartment in order to propose the photographic documentation of a dynasty plate being smashed to pieces with a hammer. This violent act of iconoclasm is a confronting spectacle and goes to the heart of Weiwei's infamy as an artist. RongRong's involvement is critical, as it is his lens that acts as the catalyst for such an overtly provocative statement.



Ai Weiwei, 1995

The photographs RongRong produced are often playful and bizarre, however their charged content also functions as an essential visual record of a short-lived but incredibly influential period in contemporary Chinese Art. The images are

testament to the indomitable spirit of artistic self-expression and in these intimate photographs of his friends, RongRong has created unique and mystifying works of abstract beauty.



---

1994 No. 2.1 (Zhang Huan, “12 Square Meters”), 1994

*‘RongRong’s Diary – Beijing East-Village’ is published by **Steidl** with an exhibition of the work ‘Day After Day – RongRong and the Beijing East Village’ on show at The Walther Collection Project Space, New York now through to 10<sup>th</sup> December 2019*

August 28, 2019

SHARE

✉ EMAIL

**f** FACEBOOK

**t** TWITTER

**g+** GOOGLE+

**in** LINKEDIN

**p** PINTEREST

Words

**Oliver Eglin**

---

## RELATED ARTICLES

ART & PHOTOGRAPHY



ART & PHOTOGRAPHY







**Jewelled Wit**



**Deep Breaths**

ART & PHOTOGRAPHY



**This is Not America**

ART & PHOTOGRAPHY



**Cecilia Vicuña: COS x Serpentine  
Park Nights**

ART & PHOTOGRAPHY



**Printed in North Korea**



- DISTRIBUTORS
- SUBMISSIONS
- ABOUT
- CONTACT

Sign up to receive our fortnightly **Newsletter**, direct to your inbox every other Thursday.

SUBSCRIBE TO NEWSLETTER



GET PORT DELIVERED

Subscribe to Port Magazine annually and receive each issue to your door.

GET PORT IN PRINT