

A C K B A R A B B A S

PUBLIC WORLDS

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Series Editors

VOLUME 2

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VOLUME 1

Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*

Hong Kong

*Culture and the
Politics of Disappearance*



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of hyphenation, coming into existence sometime in the future. Otherwise, it would be hard to answer the question of whether this future extends beyond 1997. To paraphrase Walter Benjamin, architecture would be in ruins even when—especially when—the monuments that make it up have not crumbled.

5

Photographs by Jamila Ismail

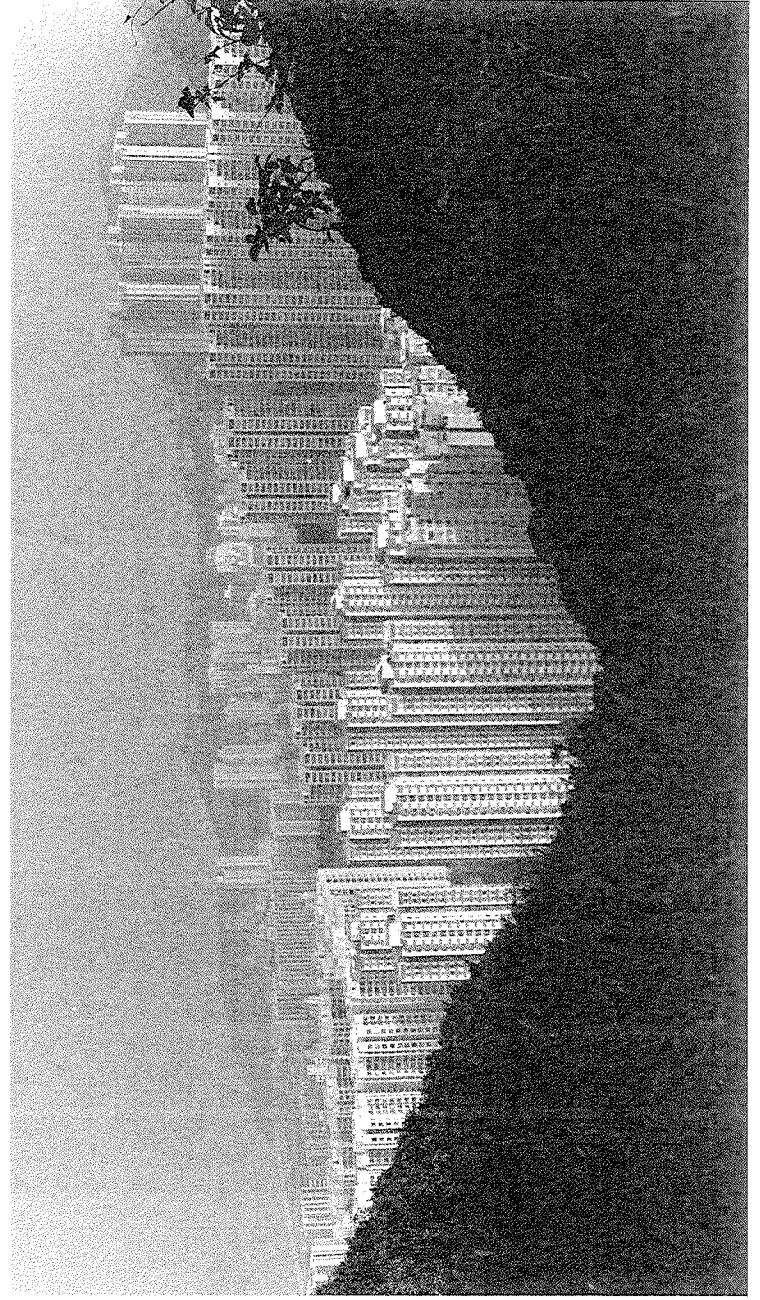
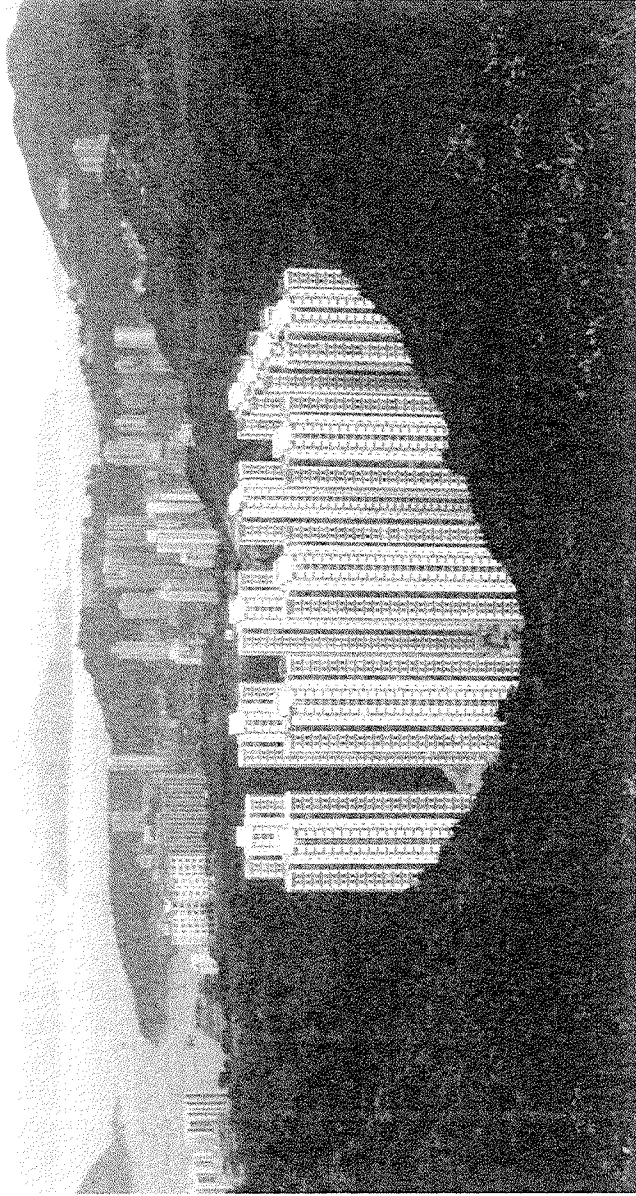
Photographing Disappearance

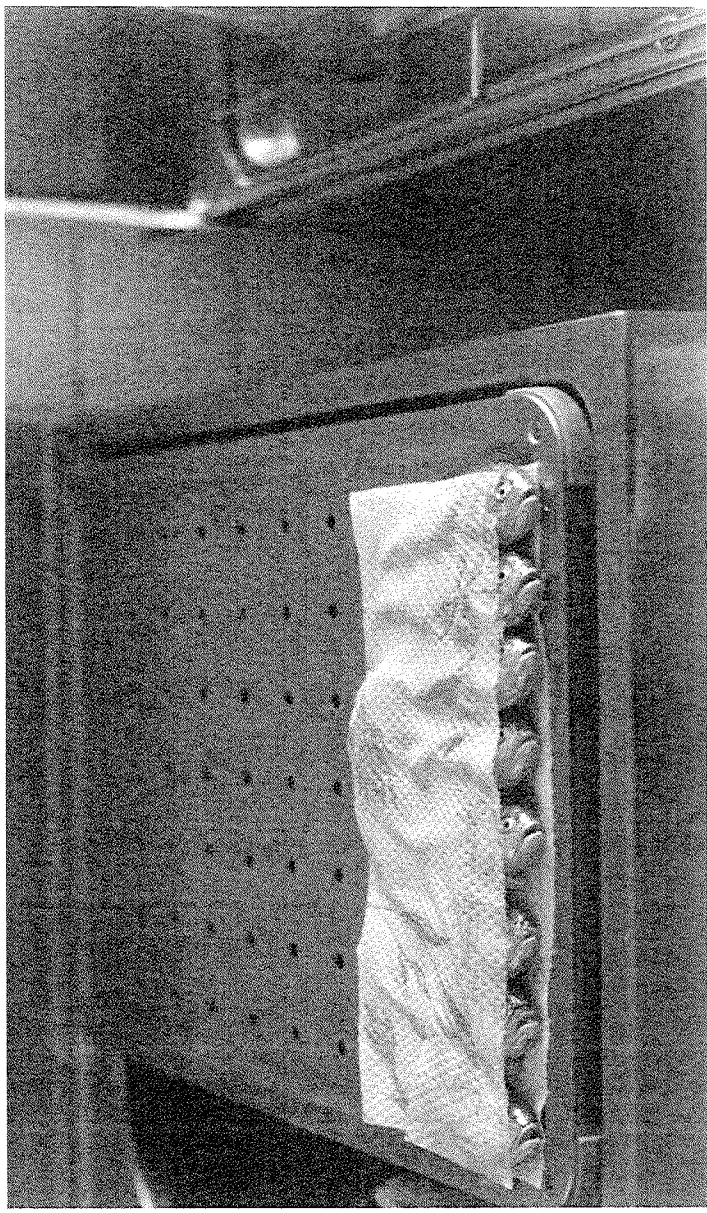
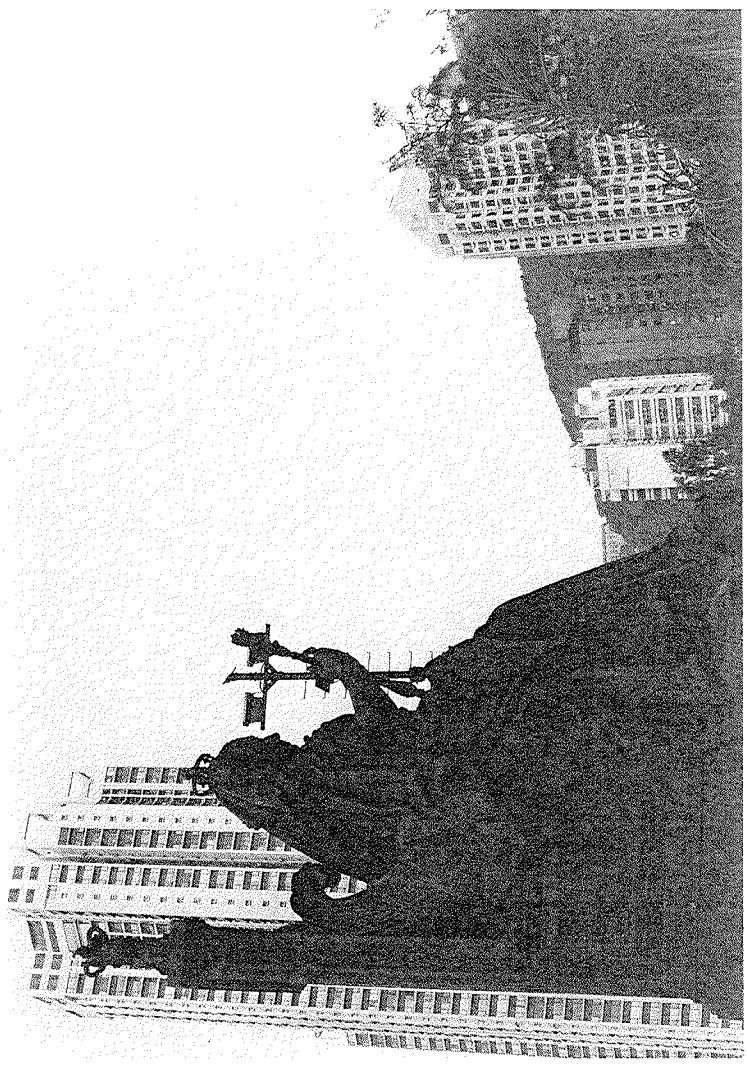
Hong Kong is one of the world's most photographed cities.

It is not a matter of producing more or better photographs of Hong Kong, but of using the photograph as a means of seeing what is involved in looking at and thinking about the city.

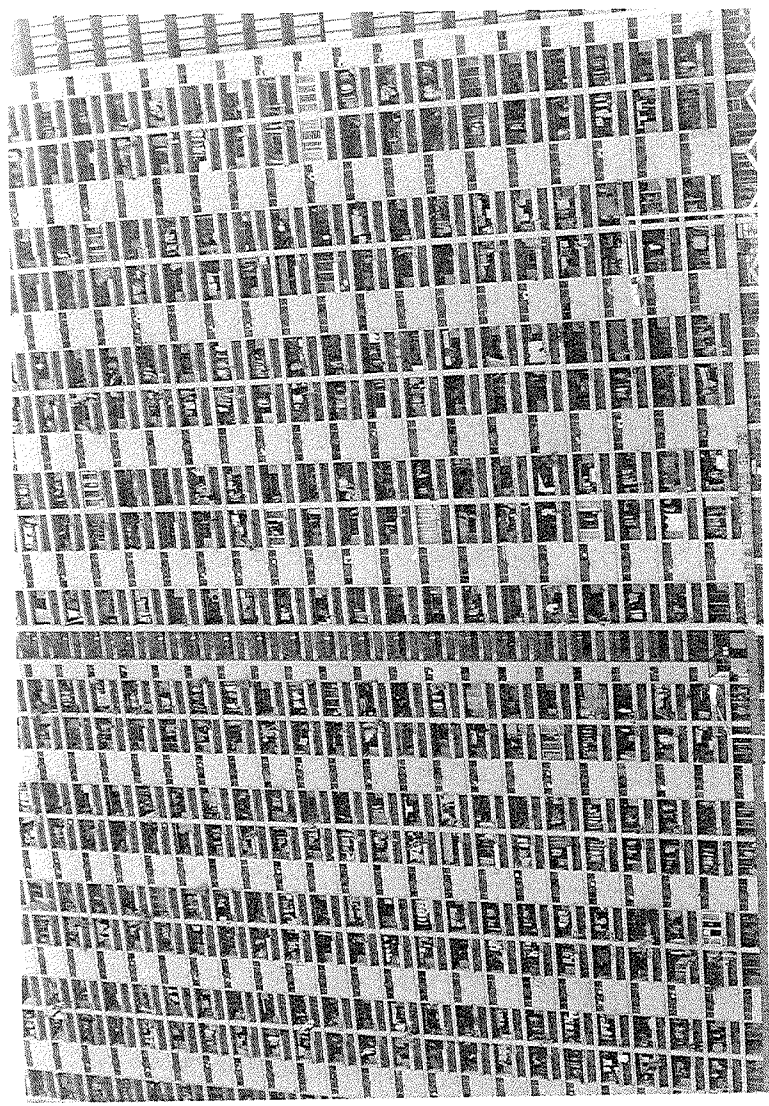
From this point of view, the project of photographing Hong Kong—photographing disappearance—is related to the project of a Hong Kong cinema and a Hong Kong architecture.

The camera lens puts the city on the couch. The visual is a means of interrogating visibility: its puns and parapraxia. Not just an optical unconscious; a spatial unconscious as well.





Fish arranged by Juliette Borbe



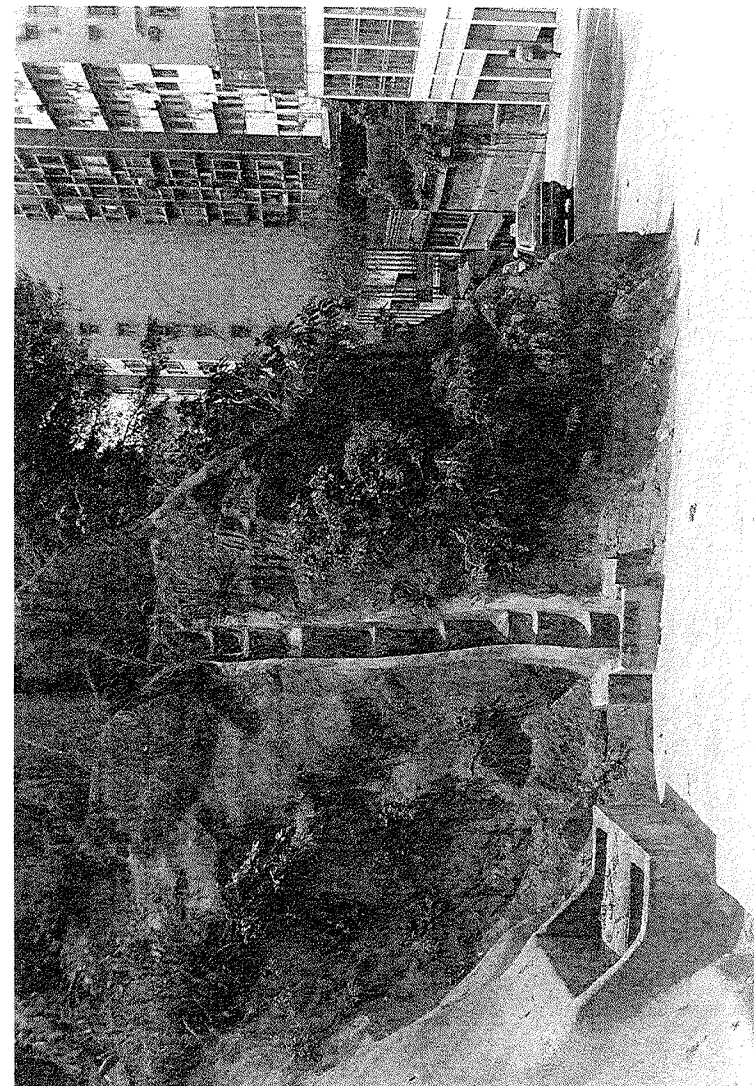
In picture postcards of Hong Kong, the implied referent is always "Hong Kong-ness." Hence the need to catch some representative and recognizable aspect of the city. A list of postcard subjects/themes would include:

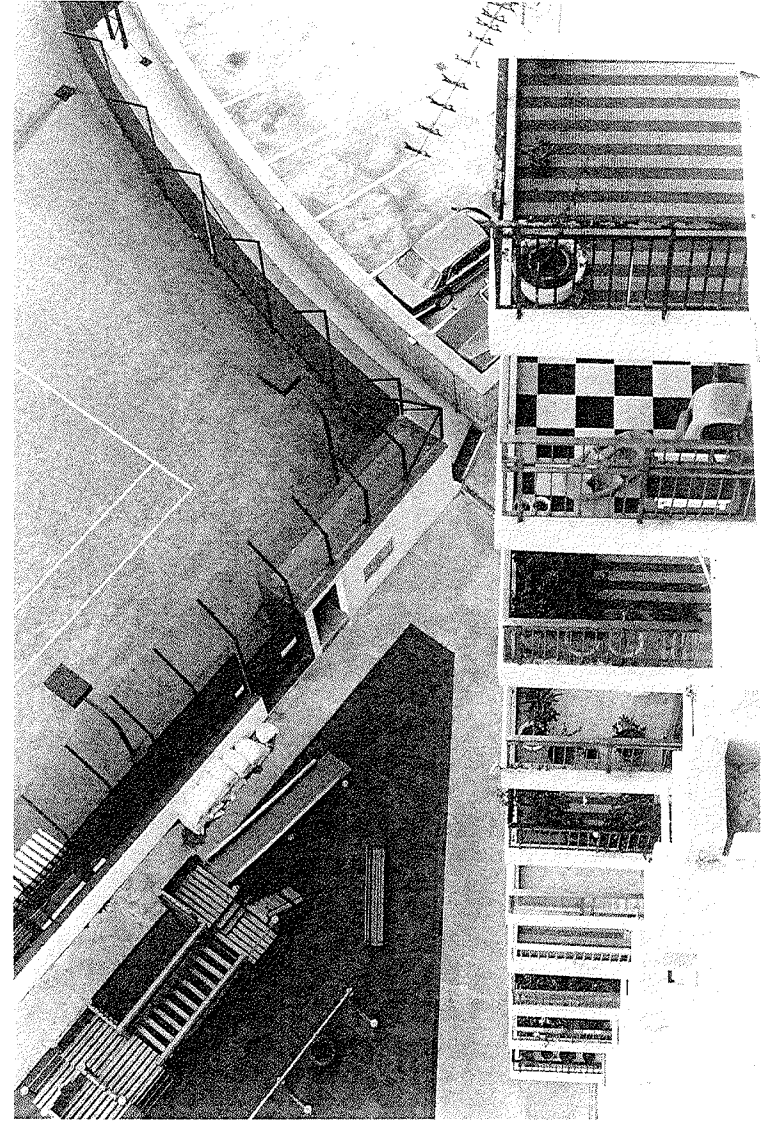
The Celebration of Power—shots of the Hong Kong skyline, gravitating toward the landscape of power of Central; an emphasis on landmarks.

Stereotypes of Otherness—shots of sailing junks, rickshaws, the Peak tram, and other passé objects, that is, all those images that build up a picture of a mythic/exotic city, where "contrasts" are all too predictable and ethnic/cultural "mixtures" are made up of elements that are easily separable.

Hong Kong Graffiti—nostalgic images of old Hong Kong; not the return of past memory, but the return of memory to the past.

"What a Beautiful World"—"photography is unable to say anything about a power station or a cable factory other than this: what a beautiful world. . . . for it has succeeded in transforming even abject poverty, by recording it in a fashionably perfected manner, into an object of enjoyment." (Walter Benjamin) Case in point: photographs of the Kowloon Walled City.







The "ordinary" photograph differs in many respects from the picture postcard.

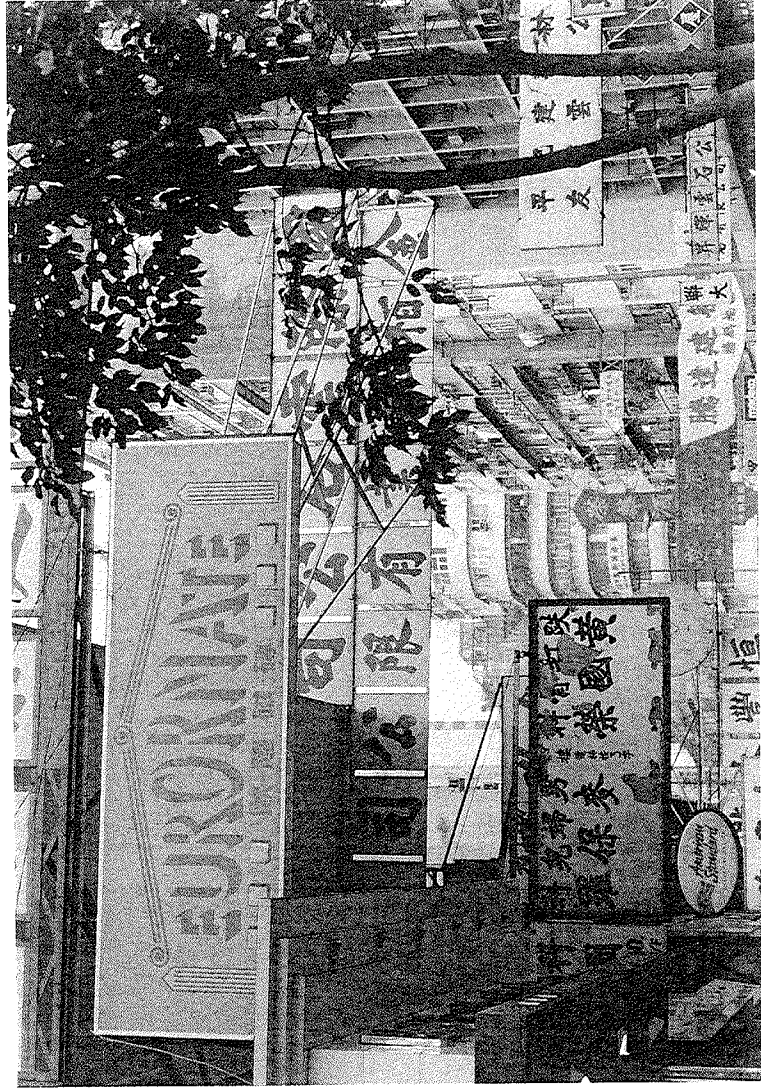
It does not claim to be representative, celebratory, expressive, or even critical. The referent is not assumed to be known. There is neither the shock nor the reassurance of recognition.

As document, it does not make evident; it provides evidence. As documentary, it puts the stress not on getting a fix on the object, but on chance, nonvoluntarism, opening the image to speculation.

It takes to heart Italo Calvino's description of cities: "With cities, it is as with dreams. . . . but even the most unexpected dream is a rebus that conceals a desire or, its reverse, a fear." It does not catch the city at a critical moment; it catches the city *out* at a moment of unawareness.

It encourages the viewer not so much to look—what is there to see?—as to *look again*; not so much to take in what is there, as to do a double take.

The sight of the city—what is given to view—is qualified by the site of the city, by the paradoxical nature of a cultural space of disappearance that challenges visual recuperation.



Roland Barthes believed that the photograph is always "a certificate of presence." Disappearance, too, is more a matter of presence rather than absence, of superimposition rather than erasure. Hence an elective affinity between the photograph and disappearance?

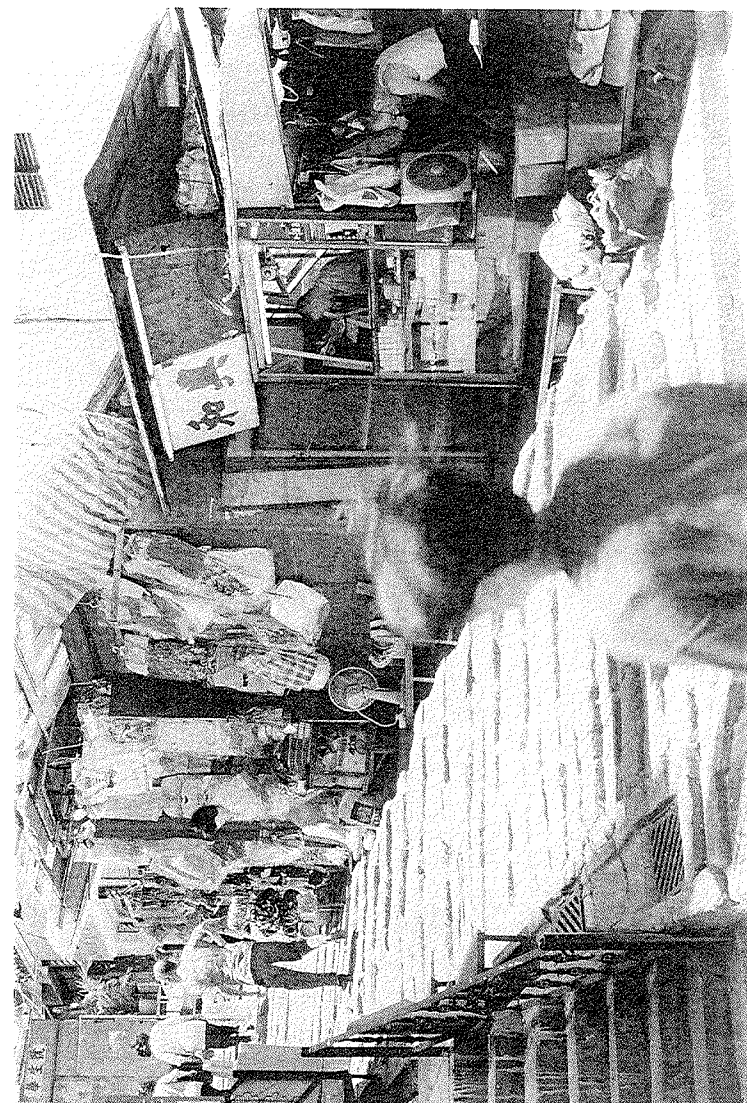
Photographing disappearance produces a thereness that is not quite there, a "concrete abstraction" (Henri Lefebvre).

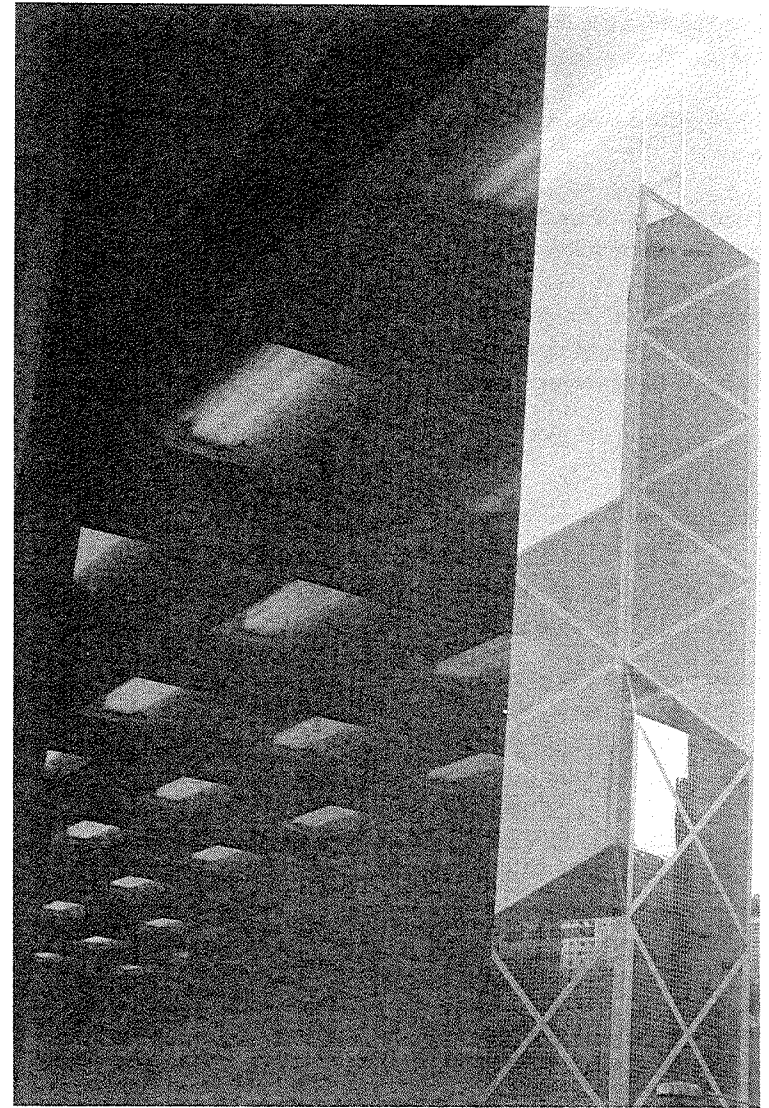
It is not a question of empty lots and blurred images. Disappearance gives us not the poignancy of the ephemeral ("borrowed time, borrowed place") nor the pathos of the diasporic, but the paradox of a space we have to second guess in order to experience. A flat montage of "lost dimensions" (Paul Virilio).

To photograph disappearance is not to defamiliarize, only that a sense of the unfamiliar grows out of forms that remain stubbornly familiar. Like the uncanny.

To look out for indices of disappearance is not the same as to fetishize, or to seize on a detail as a substitute gratification *faute de mieux*; rather, it is a matter of interrogating in detail the fetish itself.

If the traumatic image is the image about which there is nothing to say (Barthes again), then nothing is more traumatic than the nondescript.





Like the uncanny, disappearance dissolves boundaries and moves toward the paradoxes of hyphenation, for example, "one country, two systems."

Hyphenation suggests a twist in cultural space. What separates also connects.

Hyphenation means that the photograph has to become comparative, in a situation where stable terms of comparison do not exist.

The release of the shutter, like a throw of the dice, can never abolish chance. Photographic seeing includes seeing the photograph as an object lesson in disappearance.

6

Writing Hong Kong

To speak of "Writing Hong Kong" implies something different from speaking of "Hong Kong Writing," even though it may sometimes be difficult to distinguish between them in any clear-cut way. The latter might involve embarking on a critical survey of local authors and of texts produced in and on Hong Kong. It would be concerned with discussing a wide and representative number of works, written mainly in Cantonese, that would define a corpus and lead to the establishment of a tradition of Hong Kong literature. It might even pose questions of identity like, what is a Hong Kong writer? or what constitutes an authentic Hong Kong text? By contrast, writing Hong Kong has a different emphasis. It is less concerned with authors and writing, or with problems of corpus formation, than with asking how in the process of writing Hong Kong, Hong Kong as cultural space inscribes itself in the text. It is concerned then with writing that bears the traces of such a cultural space (of disappearance). Such an emphasis has the advantage, at least for my purposes, of placing writing on the same footing as cinema and architecture vis-à-vis Hong Kong culture. This allows us to pose a number of questions that have been explored in previous chapters: questions of history, space and place, affectivity, language, the changing meaning of the local, and so on. But it would also allow us to pose these questions from the different angle of writing, and to raise some other questions as well.