GEOGRAFIA RECURSIVA

FOTOGRAFIA E INSTALAÇÃO

地演 - 蘇約翰攝影及裝置作品展

RECURSIVE GEOGRAPHY

PHOTOGRAPHY AND INSTALLATION

JOÃO Ó

蘇 約 翰

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RECURSIVE GEOGRAPHY – THE CHOICE OF JOÃO Ó

ANA PAULA CLETO GODINHO

安娜

João Ó holds a degree in Architecture by Universidade Técnica de Lisboa and a Master degree in Architecture and Urban Culture by the Polytechnic University of Catalonia, as well as a vast artistic curriculum that includes exhibitions in Europe (Portugal – Lisbon, Porto, Monsaraz, United Kingdom – London, Italy – Venice and Florence) and China (Hong Kong, Beijing, Guangzhou and Macau). Today, his work is featured in several public collections, such as those of the Macau Museum of Art, the Macau Cultural Centre, the Cultural Institute of Macau and the Art for All Society.

João Ó now brings us an exhibition of photographs with the title **Recursive Geography**. The pieces in this exhibition transport us to the trails of Coloane Island, which is currently the last extant natural space in the Macau Special Administrative Region.

For those who live in Macau, walled in by concrete, the choice of João Ó could hardly be more meaningful. Indeed, it is as if the artist whished to transpose to the city, dense with people and buildings, the fresh, quiet and solitary nature that subtly left today's city.

At the same time, this exhibition points towards the reality of a last instance of nature, so alive and so close, that perhaps represents the sole real legacy for the possibility of a healthy life in Macau.

The attention of the viewer is immediately drawn to the beauty that the artist imbued the images with, as they remind us that nature's architecture should cohabit alongside man's architecture and, for that reason, should be recreated and preserved recursively.

It is a great honour for the Orient Foundation to present this exhibition by João Ó. We would like to sincerely congratulate the artist for his choice of theme, which could not have been more timely or up-to-date, as well as by the way in which he captured nature.

Coordinator of the Macau Delegation
of the Orient Foundation

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熱帶的現代性：植物能源的管理和人類植物的修葺

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ROBIN PECKHAM

羅賓·佩卡姆

João Ó has located a recursive geography – a fabled white whale of postmodern cultural production that has appeared in texts from the Borgesian to the Deleuzian – in South China, where, truth be told, it is a rather more commonplace occurrence. Whereas semantics has taught us to memorize the dictum that the map is not the territory, a constellation of cultural practices ranging from the casinos of the Cotai Strip to the Splendid China and Window on the World theme parks of Shenzhen and still further to the shopping mall urban planning of Hong Kong proves in a very material and highly sensible way that, following Gregory Bateson, the territory can only ever be defined through representation. In the recent photographic series *Recursive Geography* (2011) Ó mines this specific space of simulation and immersion in an attempt to seek out something more essential in the relationship between urban man and encroaching nature, a pseudo-ontological pursuit that inspires by virtue of its implicitly exaggerated approach. Consisting of some 32 images taken at various points and at various times along the Coloane Fitness Circuit, these photographs serve to demarcate an internal barrier between city (or, more broadly, *technes*) and wilderness, adopting a visual rhetoric of studio-style ambient lighting and careful positioning to present an impressively flexible relationship of environmental recursion.

Borrowing something (but perhaps not too much) from Fredric Jameson in terms of cognitive mapping while recognizing that the best map is always the territory in question, João Ó has explored the strikingly prosaic qualities of this particular hiking path extensively. He has structured the resulting images according to a series of categories, labels, tags, and attributes: some are inherently attractive because of formal qualities in rock formations and the colors of vegetation; some depict the ways in which plants and sand encroach back even on the mostly well-maintained path; infrastructural components like electrical wires and empty reservoirs; one actual tree even appears akin to a camouflaged cell phone tower. At the same time, Ó (drawing on his architectural work) seeks to prove his willingness to redeem such synthetic visions of the newly natural installing a second project entitled *Suspended Gardens* (2011). Here, plastic vines climb across folding metal beds as the sounds of planes and trucks boom out from the temporary structures – if *Recursive Geography* constitutes an implicit critique at a distance from the present situation, *Suspended Gardens* finds something productive to reclaim within the aesthetic strategies of Cantonese pastiche. The aesthetic is forced, but the artificiality is real.

According to the theoretical canon of contemporary architecture as codified by Rem Koolhaas (and never entirely substantiated by empirical research), Singapore represents the purest instantiation of this approach to the remolding of the relationship to the environmental context. A highly functional urban space, connections between open space and residential zones are as carefully managed as the quotas of class and ethnicity that define the social composition of dominant public housing developments; according to this mythology, the island-nation is a laboratory for this distillation of functioning political ideologies, controlling the rapid growth of the surrounding tropical ecosystem through the liberal and sporadic application of concrete and glass. In this scenario, it may be the canals – so necessary for the normative implementation of a financial center besieged by regular equatorial downpours – that, parallel to highways, function as a regional analogue for the Coloane Fitness Circuit that João Ó has taken as his object of interpretation.

SOBRE O TRILHO
(CARTA ABERTA E UMA SÉRIE DE MEANDROS)

關於路徑（公開信與漫談）

ON THE TRAIL
(AN OPEN LETTER AND SERIES OF MEANDERINGS)

JOSHUA ROBERTS

約書亞·羅伯茨

I. Crossing Paths

Perhaps tellingly the first of the months-long dialogue João and I would have and that culminated in this essay happened on the steps of the Fundação Oriente (the very building in which this exhibition will be installed). He had just gotten back from a residency in Beijing and I was soon to depart for the United States. No less significant was that we crossed paths, quite literally, on those steps due to TIMC and the Congress of Portuguese Architects that were happening in the city – events that brought together individuals from all corners of the globe to Macau. The subsequent exchanges occurred via email across a variety of extremely far-flung locales and the conversation often oscillated typically between apologies for delay due to travel, friendly holiday greetings, discussions of various theoretical concepts, mundane questions of technical procedures, and banal pleasantries. All of these aspects could constitute, of course, the content of most any email. Still for some reason I couldn't shake off the idea that somehow, the very dislocated nature of these exchanges had a lot to say about a work that is so 'site specific'. The title is after all "Recursive Geography" and as a result very much rooted in a specific place, a specific *topos*, and a procedure that reproduces itself ad infinitum. Likewise certain questions continued to forcefully keep popping up in my mind, chief of which was, why present a series of landscape photography in the same territory it geographically coexists with? And even more pressingly, for me personally as an author, how does one begin a text that will be, by the very nature of the peculiarities of the MSAR, trilingual in its final form and therefore reflecting the landscape in which it emerged, however tangentially. Though we share adjacent geographic spaces and each calls this part of Southern China home, how does one even begin to question the idea of "place" in all its real and fictive dimensions? It was later in continuing discussions with the artist that I would come to understand the work as belonging to an ethical regime of image-making, and begin to more truly follow the artist's path.[1]

II. Arboreal Wanderings

In order to get to the root of this question, which I feel permeates João's work and my personal understanding of it, it is important to note a generational attitude toward Modernism and Post-modernism and all the other "Post-" that have come in the aftermath. I believe that Nicolas Bourriaud's concept of the *Radicant* (in and of itself a generationally modified understanding of Gilles Deleuze) is especially helpful to contextualize this work. Bourriaud notes: "And yet the immigrant, the exile, the tourist, and the urban wanderer are the dominant figures of contemporary culture. To remain within the vocabulary of the vegetable realm, one might say that the individual of the early years of the Twenty-First century resembles those plants that do not depend on a single root for their growth but advance in all directions on whatever surfaces present themselves by attaching multiple hooks to them… With its at once dynamic and dialogical signification, the adjective "radicant" captures this contemporary subject caught between the need for a connection with its environment and the forces of uprooting, between globalization and singularity, between identity and opening to the other. It defines the subject as an object of negotiation."[2]

1. The invocation of the *detour* or wandering by Jacques Rancière, as well as the questioning of the end result of image-making within a community, permeate this essay and my own thinking on the use and truth content of the work presented. "A detour is necessary here in order to clarify this notion and situate the problem. With regard to what we call *art* it is in fact possible to distinguish, within the Western tradition, three major regimes of identification. There is first of all what I propose to call an ethical regime of images. In this regime 'art' is not identified as such but subsumed under the questions of images. As a specific type of entity images are the object of a twofold question: the question of their origin (and consequently truth content) and the question of their end or purpose, the uses they are put to and the effects they result in." Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, MPG Books Ltd. Bodwim, Cornwall, UK, 2004. p. 21: "It is in this sense that I speak of an ethical regime of images. In this regime, it is a matter of knowing in what way images' mode of being affects the ethos, the mode of being of individuals and communities." Rancière, Ibid. p. 20.

2. Nicholas Bourriaud, *The Radicant*, Lukas and Steinberg, 2009. p. 51.

I find the borrowing of Bourriaud's concept of the *Radicant* especially pertinent in its evocation of the arboreal and the focus on movement in light of João's previous work on cinema and architecture. Additionally, in discussion with the artist, he often revealed his interest in the cinematic and natural aspects of Macau in opposition (or perhaps juxtaposition) with the artificial, but no less globalized and cinematic qualities of the tourist-known Macau. And so in turning back to initial question what is one to make of this work and its title "Recursive Geography"? How does one begin to reconcile its obvious interest in Macau's older history and present reality all while significantly and consciously avoiding the "elephant in the room" that is the present state of Macau's development? And what exactly are the photos valorizing? The paradox of the "artificialization" of the landscape or an attempt to document a natural sublime? The photos themselves are always taken at the same pseudo-scientific vantage point (eye-level) and framed congruously the same way to have a consistent perspectival focus where the line of sight converges in the center of the frame. The only times the frame seems to wander are when the artist's eye is caught by an odd arboreal or aberrant geographic feature. While this oddly scientific gaze may at first seem to be apathetic and aloof and therefore devoid of politics, I would argue it points to a deeper and conflicted politics that reveals much about the precarious situation of the MSAR and our own role as architects and artists in the construction of vast new utopian worlds at the sacrifice of an older natural world and landscape.[3]

III. A Middle Landscape

So what does this all mean? Should this project that reveals so many contradictions, divides, and competing spaces of desires between the artificial and natural be held accountable to *say* something? Should it concretely weigh in on one side of the argument of nature versus concrete? Of the embrace of rampant casino development versus the total rejection of that model of development? My response would be an emphatic no. We have for too long seen the calcification of arguments on either side. And if nothing else this essay is a defense for something in between, a radical politics that informs of the contradictions that exist and rather than offer a calcified and concrete view, and much like the work that inspired the essay, it seeks to create fissures in the discourse and then subsequently take advantage of those fissures that are so desperately needed. Perhaps these fissures, much like the geographical features presented in the photos, can be a new middle landscape of discourse that leads to a productive rethinking of our current models of development and our relationship to the city and nature.[4]

3. Again Rancière's concept of 'fictionality' in regard to specific places and spaces is highly useful in understanding the conceptual agenda embedded in the photos. "It is the identification of modes of fictional construction with means of deciphering the signs inscribed in the general aspect of a place, a group, a wall, an article of clothing, a face. It is the association between, on one hand, accelerations or decelerations of language, its shuffling of images or sudden changes of tone, all its difference of potential between the insignificant and the overly significant or overly meaningful, and on the other hand, the modalities of a trip through the landscape of significant traits deposited in the topography of spaces, the physiology of social circles, the silent expression of bodies. The 'fictionality' specific to the aesthetic age is consequently distributed between two poles: the potential meaning inherent in everything silent and the proliferation of modes of speech and meaning." Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, MPG Books Ltd. Bodwim, Cornwall, UK, 2004. pp. 36-37.

4. Regarding a new middle landscape of politics and the desire for a more open model of discourse, two pieces of text kept coming forcefully to mind during the writing of this essay. The first is again from Rancière, "The real must be fictionalized in order to be thought. [...] The notion of "narrative" locks us into oppositions between the real and the artifice where both the positivists and the deconstructionists are lost. It is not a matter of claiming that everything is fiction. It is a matter of stating that the fiction of the aesthetic age defined models for connecting the presentation of facts and forms of intelligibility that blurred the border between the logic of facts and the logic of fiction." [Further] "politics and art, like forms of knowledge, construct fictions, that is to say material rearrangements of signs and images, relationships between what is seen and what is said, between what is done and what can be done." Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, MPG Books Ltd. Bodwim, Cornwall, UK, 2004. pp. 38-39. The second is from a conversation and interview of the American author David Foster Wallace by Dave Eggers on the need for young authors to engage in political writing. Taken together they form much of the basis for the call to turn away from older calcified arguments and the need for engagement expressed in this text. "The

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RECURSIVE GEOGRAPHY

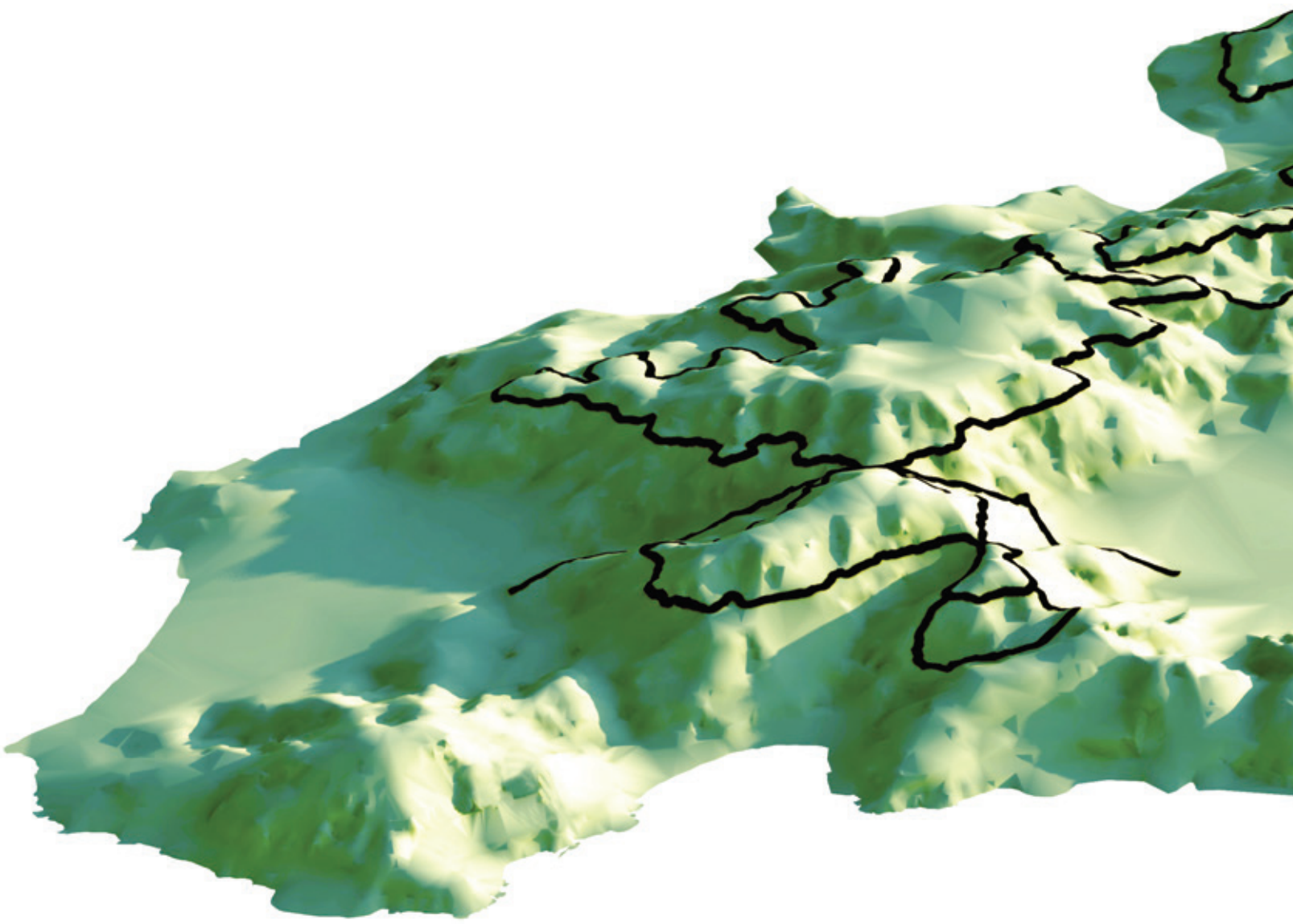
PHOTOGRAPHY AND INSTALLATION

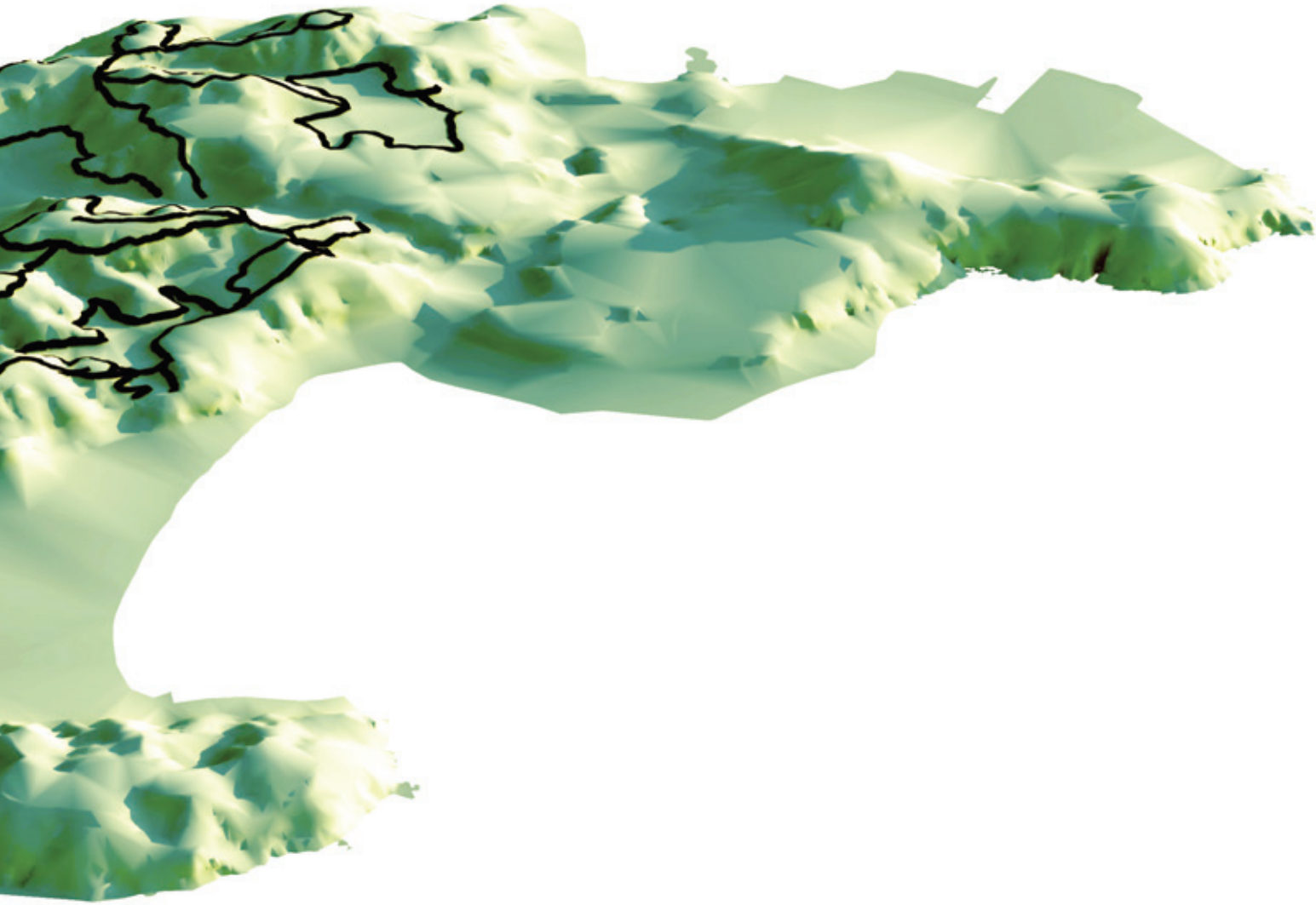

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No.1906#
No.1969#
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No.2521#
No.2489#
No.2182#
No.2238#
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250
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1000m

Simulação 3D do Circuito de Coloane

路環步行徑之三維效果圖

3D rendering of Coloane fitness circuit





PÁGINA SEGUINTE
Série Geografia Recursiva
2011, composta por 32 fotografias, prova por revelação cromogénea, dimensão 468 x 164 cm (50 x 33 cm cada), Edição 2 + 1 PA.

下頁
地演系列
2011年，三十二禎相片組成系列，彩印，尺寸：468 x 164 cm (單禎：50 x 33 cm) 版數：2 張 + 1 張 藝術家自存

NEXT PAGE
Recursive Geography series
2011, composed by 32 photographs, chromogenic print, dimension 468 x 164 cm (50 x 33 cm each), Edition 2 + 1 AP.





No.1716#

2011, Prova por revelação cromogénea, 120 x 80 cm, Edição 6 + 1 PA

2011年, 彩印, 120 x 80 cm, 版數 : 6 張 + 1 張 藝術家自存

2011, Chromogenic print, 120 x 80 cm, Edition 6 + 1 AP



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2011, Prova por revelação cromogénea, 120 x 80 cm, Edição 6 + 1 PA

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2011, Chromogenic print, 120 x 80 cm, Edition 6 + 1 AP



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