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Lost Caller

Sara Velas

Abstract

Lost Caller is a photo essay presenting excerpts from an ongoing collection of cellphone photographs I have taken of broken & abandoned public telephone sites. This collection began serendipitously in 2013 through correspondence.

Lost Caller is a photo essay selected from an ongoing collection of photographs of broken and abandoned public telephone sites. The accumulation of these images began serendipitously in 2013 when a public payphone in my neighborhood was dismantled. I began a digital correspondence of one-image emails of these payphones with an individual from my past. Taken spontaneously on the spot with a cellphone camera, each image is quickly given a short title when sent to the other person via email. The photographs presented here (Fig. 1 – Fig. 10) are shown chronologically with their titles and the date when they were digitally communicated. As the years go on, I have developed a keen eye on spotting the remnants of payphones—sometimes the box remains with a damaged receiver (Fig. 1, Fig. 7) or all else has disappeared save for a sign flag notifying pedestrians of the presence of a (no-longer-extant) phone (Fig. 4).

These images are a simple requiem for a dying form of public urban communication: the public phone. Each remaining cubicle, signpost, or brace plate produces a split-second moment of theatre for the person passing by.

When did this payphone stop functioning?

Was this broken on purpose?

Why were some units taken out while others remain?

Who still uses these phones?

Sometimes the payphones seem to have been purposefully decommissioned and the sites are re-used in curious or humorous ways. More often these sites are downtrodden and borderline disgusting, exuding an overwhelming sense of brokenness. The mangled remnants operate as the inverse of monuments and as potent symbols of urban decay tinged with the nostalgic residue of how we once communicated in public.

The final image of this edited series (Fig. 10—*Gong Xi Fa Cai*) was taken and sent on Chinese (Lunar) New Year's day, 2016. This specimen shows the faintest trace of the payphone (the remnant of the mere mounting plate) and is also one of the more "whimsical" uses of payphone remnants. Rather than a used coffee cup or piece of trash, the plate is being used to hang a brightly colored sign, which ironically announces the "closed" days of the restaurant.

This edition only shows one side of the story. Internally, *Lost Caller* serves as a personal homage to an almost defunct relationship. The collection (numbering over 80 images) was developed in part through correspondence with one individual. There is a reciprocal set of images with titles sent to me, none of which are published here. In the past, we shared a treasured sense of affinity, affection, and admiration but somehow "regular" interactions between us became difficult. Over the years, peaked periods of communication would sever, fading into strange disconnections without discussion or response. Accidentally, this occasional exchange of broken payphone photographs developed. This correspondence remains the only way we communicate.



Fig. 1. *payphone*—This payphone is no more, 6/19/13. Photo credit: Sara Velas.



Fig. 2. *foreign affairs*, 10/6/13. Photo credit: Sara Velas.



Fig. 3. *within the jurisdiction of telephonic advantages, 1/2/14*, Photo credit: Sara Velas.

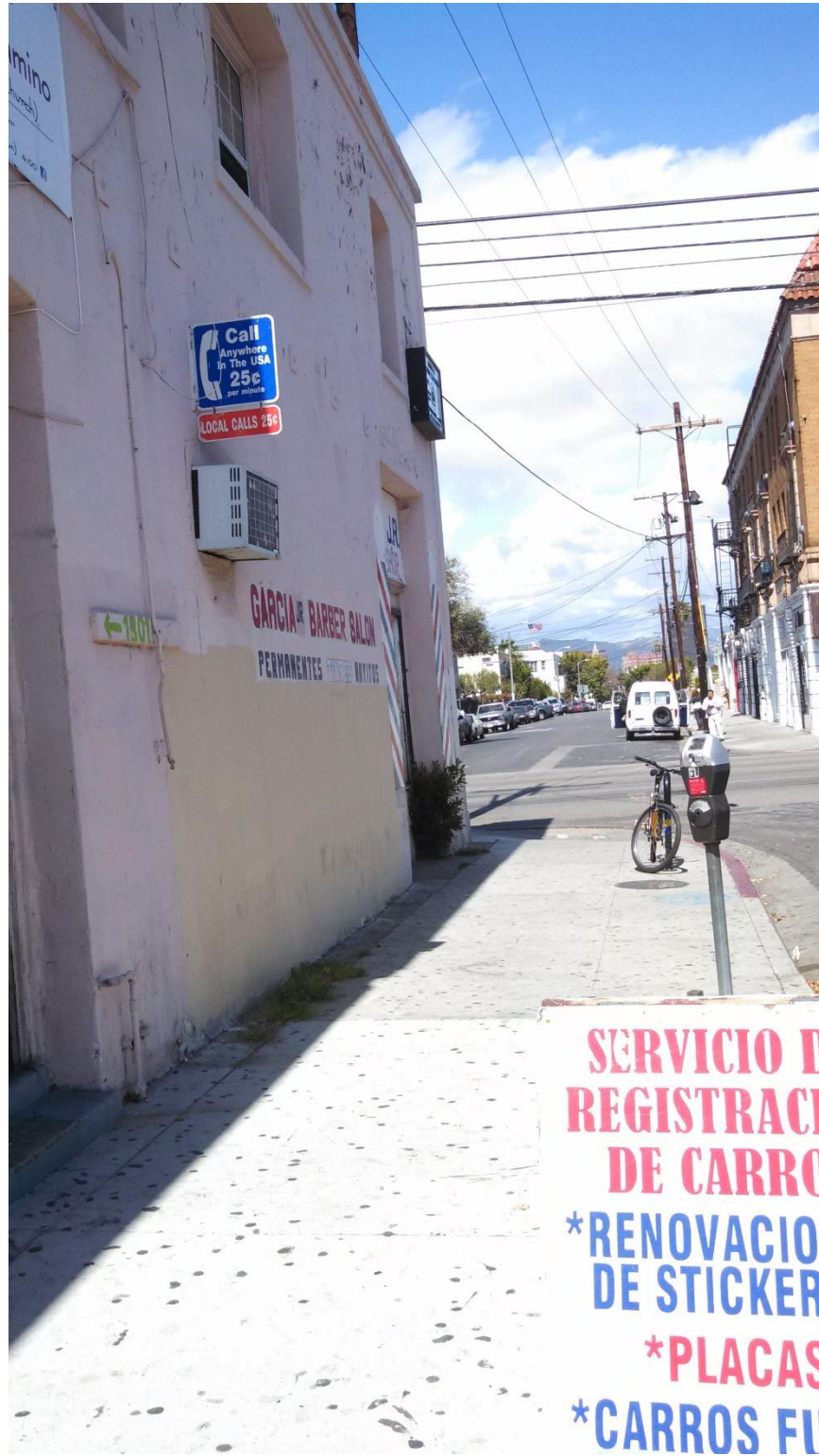


Fig. 4. *anywhere is everywhere*, 3/26/14. Photo credit: Sara Velas.

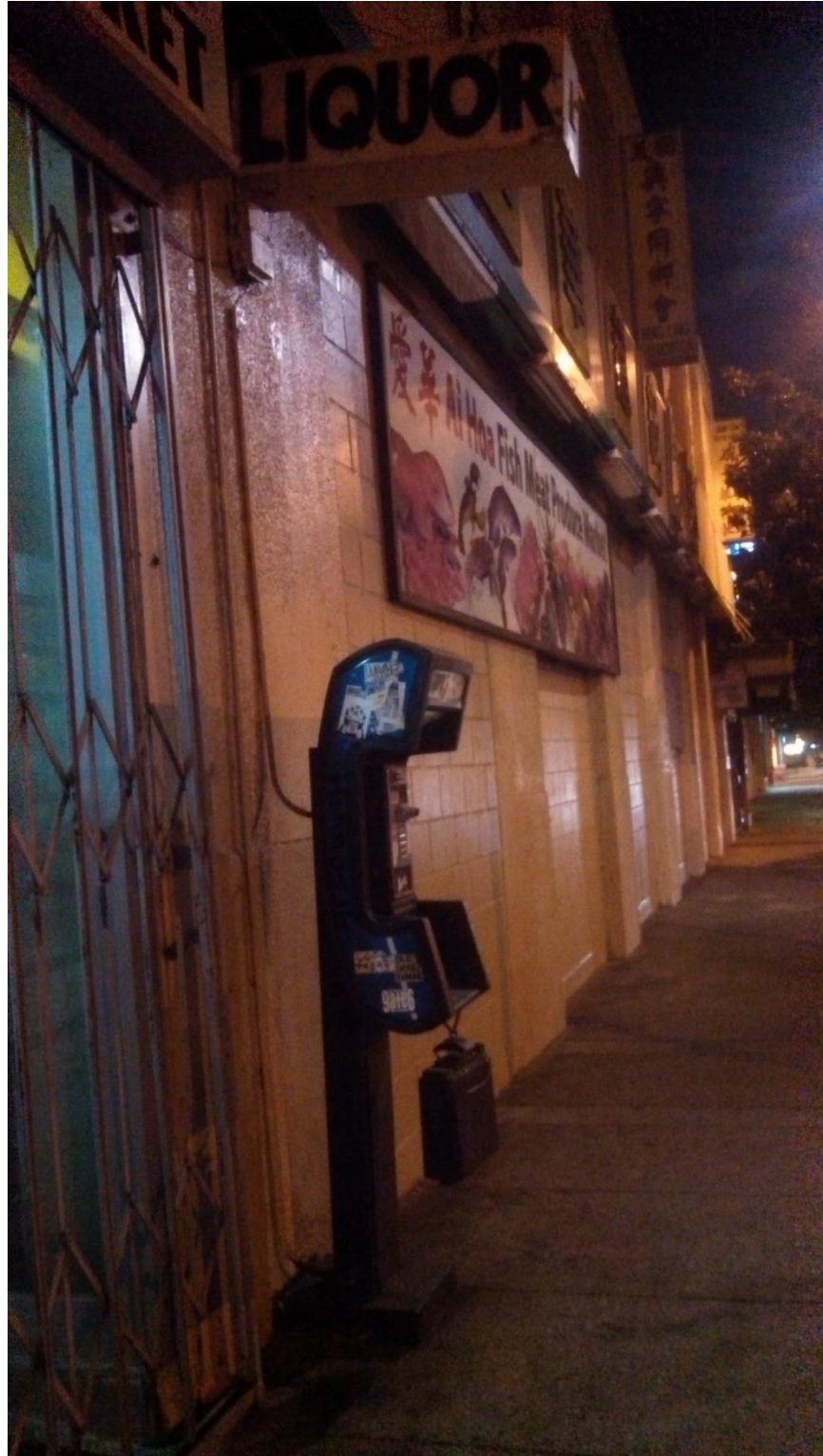


Fig. 5. *non nuit*, 6/1/14. Photo credit: Sara Velas.

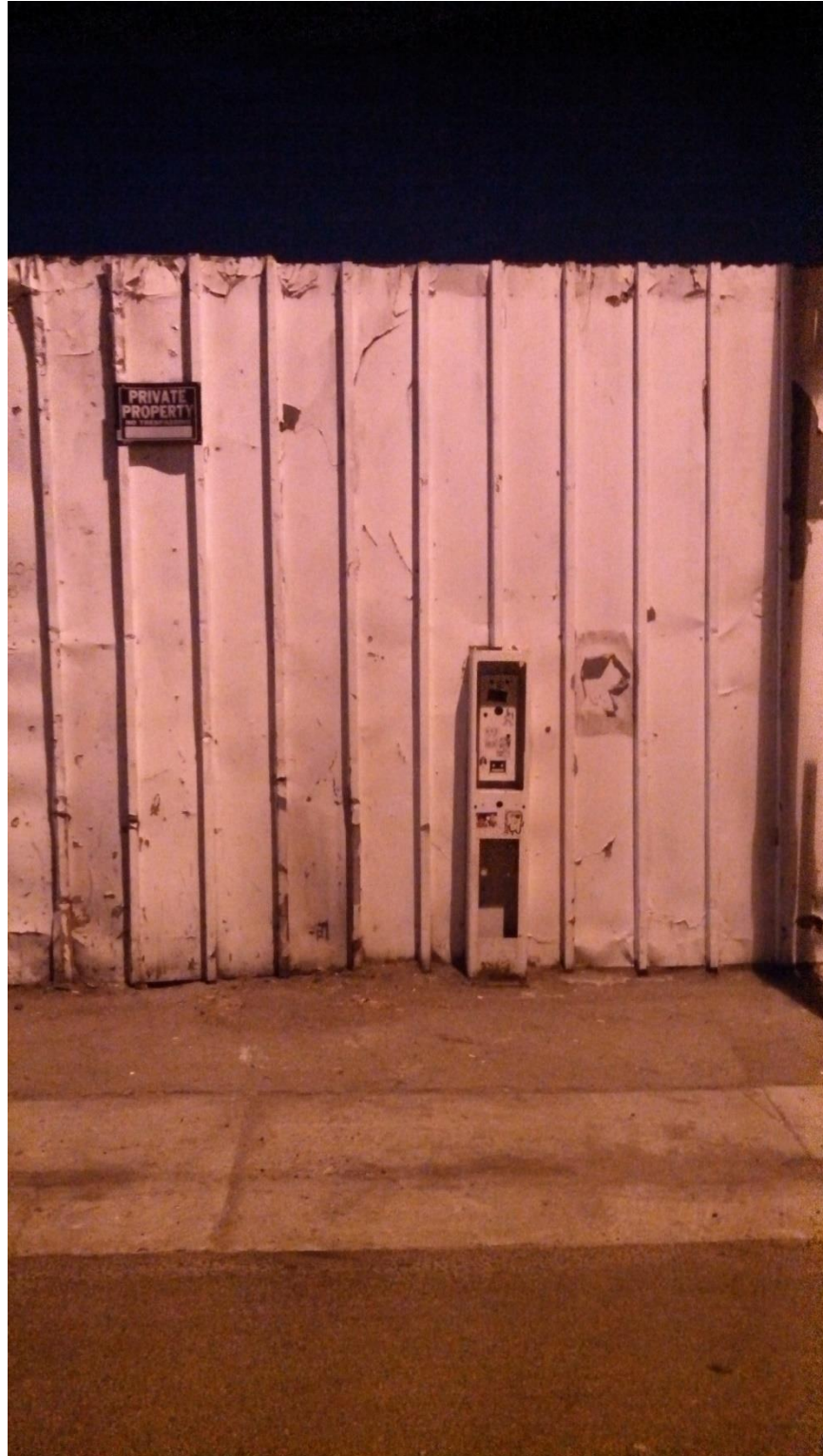


Fig. 6. *Lonesome witness*, 7/19/14. Photo credit: Sara Velas.



Fig. 7. raw power, 11/14/14, Photo credit: Sara Velas.



Fig. 8. *pu-s'frus*, 7/25/15. Photo credit: Sara Velas.



Fig. 9. *stationtostation*, 1/23/16. Photo credit: Sara Velas.



Fig. 10. *Gong Xi Fa Cai*, 2/8/16. Photo credit: Sara Velas.

About the author

Sara Velas is an artist, graphic designer, gardener, and curator. She is the Director of the Velaslavasay Panorama (www.panoramaonview.org), a nonprofit museum she established in the year 2000 to present variations on art forms & entertainments popular before the invention of cinema. Email: sara@panoramaonview.org