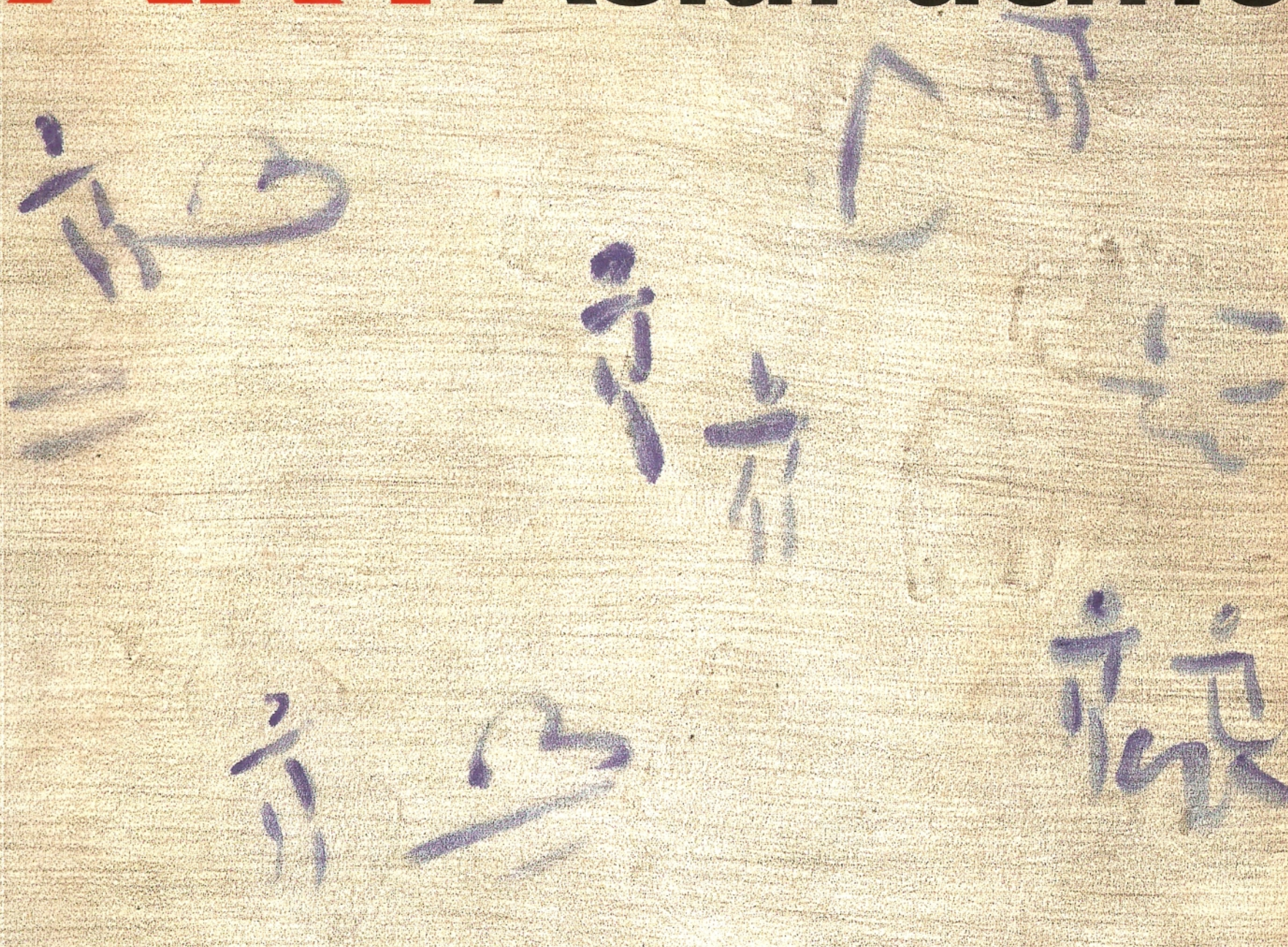


ART AsiaPacific



Dialogue

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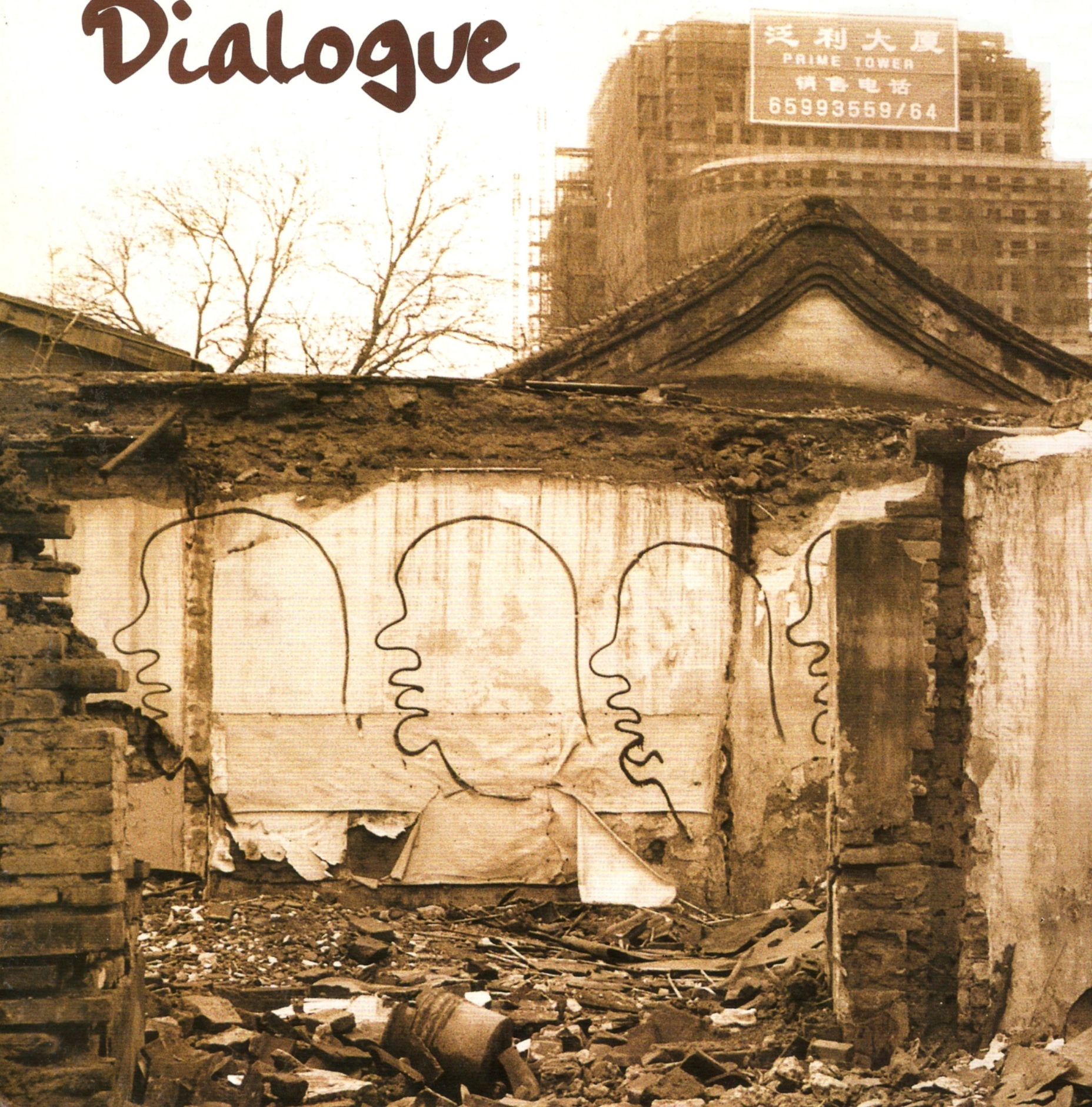
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Dialogue





Zhang Dali's conversation with Beijing

Mathieu Borysevicz

The image scrawls in one simple gesture, a black spray-painted line gracefully wiggles into the configuration of an unadorned human head, a head common to us all. It is imprinted as if by the passing breeze, a profile silently unveiled on the surface of the city. The head cannot be escaped. Wherever the road leads, the head waits.



previous page, and above and below: ZHANG DALI, *Dialogue Beijing*, 1995, spray-paint on wall; opposite page: *Dialogue Beijing*, 1998, performance.



The artist Zhang Dali has for some time been transfiguring the Beijing cityscape with his spray-painted image of a head. His heads haunt all coves and corners of the city. On walls, bridges and underpasses these heads have become part of contemporary Beijing's visual and psychological fabric. Although operating covertly, the dialogue he has created with the metamorphosing urbanity of contemporary China has made the press, and his 'Dialogue' series has suitably become a public controversy. 'Dialogue', both the title and agenda of Zhang Dali's recent works, is not a vandal's gesture intended to provoke retaliation, but an ongoing conceptual enterprise which operates on many levels and takes various forms. The route of Zhang Dali's process is one that twists the nature of these forms into the context of their settings, drawing together the most primal instinct – a line scrawled on a wall – with the sophistication of cosmopolitan public lightbox advertisements, all in an effort to incite a discourse with a society in transition.

The act of writing on a wall is an innate creative tendency dating back to the dawn of humanity. Prehistoric humans depicted their daily activities on the walls of their cave dwellings, giving later generations a glimpse of the origins of human civilisation. Zhang Dali's mark is scrawled with the same impulse and seems to pose the same existential questions: From where did we come? Why are we here? Where are we going? This head, which can be perceived literally as a caricaturesque profile of a bald man,

is at once humorous, indifferent, melancholic, even deadly serious. It is an image so bare and simple that it solicits viewers to project their own imaginary expression into its representative vacancy. It sits listless, caught in a vegetal state of wonderment, watching and not watching the wheels go round and round. From alleyway walls, kiosks, and the makeshift contraptions of city construction, the head bears witness to the scatological racing of the rats. It passes no judgment and is aggressive only in its silence and multiplicity.

Dali considers the essence of his art to be in its action. Operating in a guerrilla-like fashion, mounted on his bicycle, he strikes deep in the night. His movement has been perfected to the quick graceful rhythm of one squiggly wave. He is China's Zorro. His mark is tagged with the same insurgency of graffiti artists anywhere, however this is not some abstract signature of the author's alter ego, and Beijing is not just anywhere. The symbology employed here is figurative; it is the image of a common human denominator, immediately identifiable and therefore highly charged. It is a

backdrop that outlines the theatre of the street, a shadow cast by China's tremendous population where emergence from the crowd is not only discouraged but is logistically impossible. This image is found in an environment where conformity rules, once through political ideology, but now in the global forces of market and fashion trends. Through its repetition, the head indexes the asphyxiation of individuality in society. Often painted several at a time facing in the same direction, the heads queue up as if to mock the blind herding of the masses. The mass, however, is made of component individuals; they are all originals yet uniform. Likewise, the image is the product of a free hand, not the result of mechanical reproduction; each one is different and yet they are all the same. Zhang Dali's personal story, however, is not the same and these heads attempt, in some way, to narrate that story.

Zhang Dali is of a generation of artists and intellectuals who escaped China shortly after suffering persecution resulting from the turmoil of Tiananmen Square in 1989. His self-imposed exile to Italy occurred during a time of intense political fervour where social ideals were kindled by hope of a freer society, a hope that was prematurely and fiercely smashed. He has returned to a China that is not only in denial of its political atrocities, but one that has disguised its guilt by promoting the illusion of financial salvation. China is currently tightly in the grasp of late capitalist realities and fervent consumerism where, above all else, the dollar rules. Though China's economic development should in turn affect social development, changes in society are lagging far behind. While more and more people are becoming economically empowered, basic civil liberties are still lacking. Public displays of expression in most forms are still censored, prohibited and punished. Progress is ephemeral. Zhang Dali's story is one of disillusionment, and it is this disposition that predominantly informs his work.

Zhang Dali's time in Italy exposed him not only to the wealth of classical and contemporary fine arts, but also to the art of its streets. When Zhang Dali's head first appeared, Beijing was a city that had not yet been introduced to the urban western (anti-)aesthetic tradition of graffiti art and was therefore at a loss as to how to interpret this mark. The head appeared in a setting where public symbology was for a long time exclusively reserved for state-administered propaganda and, more recently, for the markings of urban planners and the advertising industry. Self-initiated public campaigning was a tactic reminiscent of the early 1980s democracy movement. It is behaviour considered criminal.

Zhang Dali's head, however, does not translate directly into the language of political activism and is therefore even more confounding.



Often found inscribed on buildings demarked for destruction ... these heads surface like the voices of protest, disenchantment and of the memories locked up in these spaces.



The recent press canvassing that took place in reaction to the heads revealed them as stupefying and perturbing to the citizens of the city. Many people considered Zhang Dali's heads to be an omen of destruction in their demarcation of those buildings condemned to demolition. Others more aware of his activity throughout the city thought him to be a prankster with 'obviously too much time on his hands'. Others, discontented, yet mystified, 'did not permit the head into their neighbourhood'. There were also those who were engaged by this alternative form of communication and embraced the phenomenon as something 'hip'. Either way the controversy generated by the head stirred considerably once the Chinese press officially made it a public affair.

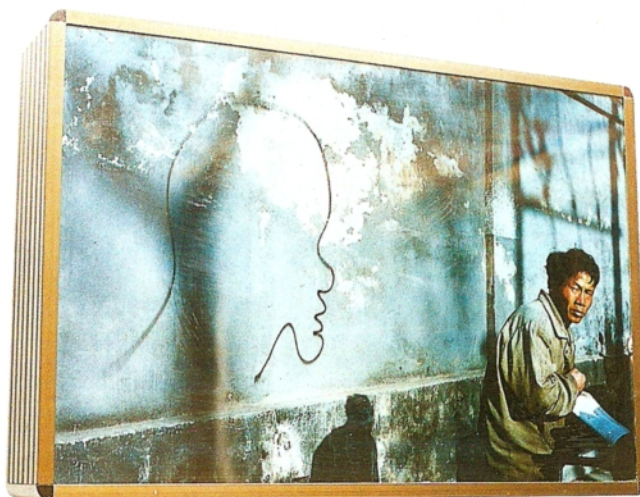
This publicised discourse has brought Zhang Dali's heads new attention that inadvertently propels his dialogue with the city further but also creates risks for its perpetuation. The work now transcends its static street setting and enters into the dimension of media proliferation. Via the voice of the state, the head officially begins to address the people, and likewise, the people each other, and so on. Many reporters, making it their endeavour to catch the culprit and expose his secrets, have forced Dali into speaking anonymously as the man behind the head. Dali professed his artistic motivation, allowing new theoretical and aesthetic questions to enter the debate. With the aid of journalistic persuasion, Beijingers began to decipher for themselves the head's enigmatic speech. This publicity is a component that allots Zhang Dali's head fifteen minutes of fame while also potentially upsetting his hither to covert status and perhaps even leading to his arrest. The dangers of publicity, however, are overshadowed by the life of the head itself, which has successfully accessed and employed the media as its tool to stimulate a debate and open up the dialogue to virtually everyone: 'I use a simple identifiable symbol as a tool to communicate with others. This symbol has intense social implications. Through its connection with the environment, its significance emerges', Zhang Dali comments.

Beijing, along with most of China's cities, has been undergoing serious structural transformation since the early 1980s. The agenda of China's economic reform plan includes an effort to modernise its urban centres, or at least project a facade of modernity. For recent visitors to China perhaps the most pertinent image is the Orwellian entwinement of building demolition and construction, the turning over of China's post-agricultural earth. The steel skeletons that decorate the skyline are testimony to the joke that China's national bird has become the crane. This construction, however, has not been without its casualties. Many of the existing one-storey courtyard homes and alleys (*hutongs*) that have composed the

city's centre for centuries are being quickly replaced by high-rise commercial centres. The residents of these homes are subsequently relocated to newly built high-rise apartment complexes on the outskirts of the city.

Beijing's structural transformation, however, has been a one-way process. It has always been the command of commerce and the state to reorganise the city. The city has always been silent, unresponsive, numb to the lacerations of its limbs and its new cosmeticisation.

Zhang Dali's head serves as a reaction to the rapid changes in the environment. It emerges as if it were the city's rebuttal. Often found inscribed on buildings demarked for destruction, or on areas already being demolished, these heads surface like the voices of protest, disenchantment and of the memories locked up in these spaces. They are the voices of the city's unearthed spirits. The small back alleys of Beijing not only hold the history of China but retain both a sense of tradition and community. Courtyard residents are forced into daily interaction with their neighbours by sheer proximity and by common water sources and passageways.

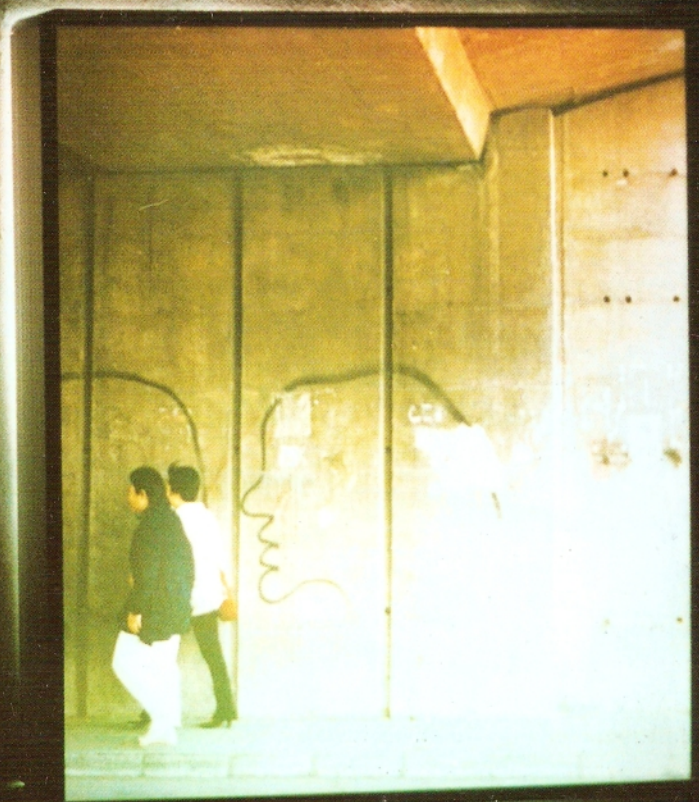
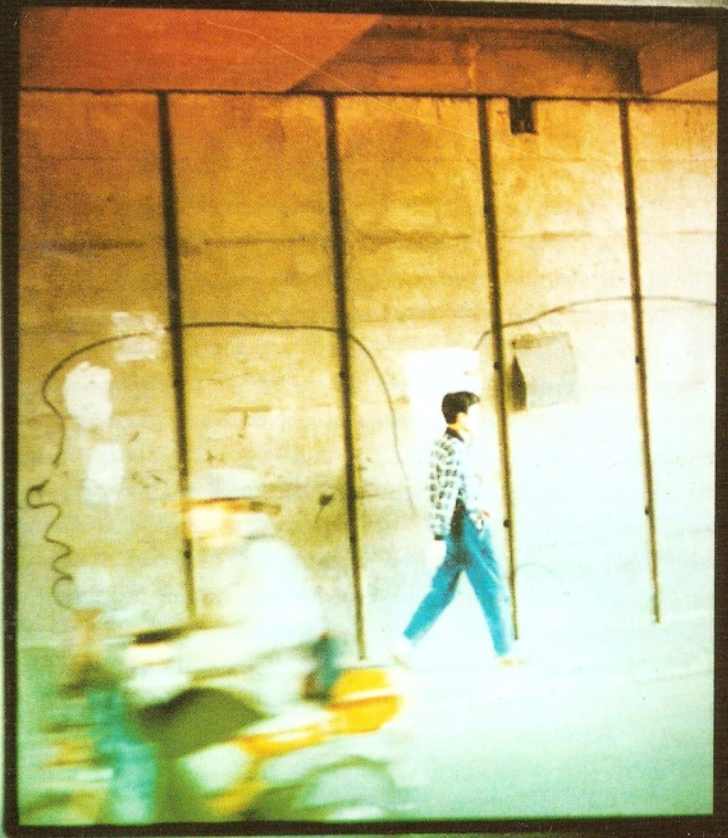


The new complexes are designed to replace community and tradition with modernity's convenience and estrangement.

China's visual, structural and ideological transformations are occurring at a pace that is accelerated to the point of artificiality, sometimes surreality. The speed of change often does not allow residents adequate time to calibrate these alterations and sometimes creates spiritual and psychological deterioration. Zhang Dali's enterprise is one that attempts to delineate this deterioration. It is one of spiritual vigilantism. 'I know that most people passing by this symbol will not recognise it as art. But I hope that people living in this period of chaotic development, in danger and violence, considering each other as enemies, will see my symbol waving to them.'

Zhang Dali professes that he is foremost a visual artist, not an activist, and as an artist his motivation is both conceptual and aesthetic. He claims that his heads serve as a public muse and, subsequently, public art. The proliferation of heads on the street, however, is only the beginning of a cycle where the pattern becomes form married to conception, as the head is moulded further into the shape of a more conventional art. The result of Zhang Dali's endeavour is a configuration composed of several different mediums crossing the languages of several disciplines, for example, social/documentary photography, advertising, graffiti, painting and drawing.

After the heads are sprayed onto their street settings, Dali photographs them. The photographs are not so much to document the act but to reveal the heads' painterly possibilities. The photographed images are computer-printed onto canvas and the canvas is then hung on stretchers. The act of painting and the documenting of the painting is completed,



The lightboxes are, ideally, to be placed back on the streets. They are to stand between the spectacle of the advertising industry and the propaganda of the state. Taking the head from the street (amid deconstruction, turmoil and change) and placing it back onto the same street (of cosmopolitanism, modernity and chicness) is a strategy that draws attention to the degree of contrast in today's China.



ZHANG DALI, *Dialogue Beijing*, 1997, photographed and computer-printed images on canvas.

unleashing not only the aesthetic and conceptual force of Zhang Dali's art, but also the street's own inherent painterliness.

This methodology advances further with the use of lightboxes. The lightboxes, Zhang Dali explains, though still not a feasible option in today's China, are, ideally, to be placed back on the streets – an act which would propel his conceptual intentions to their predestined end. They are to stand between the spectacle of the advertising industry and the propaganda of the state. Taking the head from the street (amid deconstruction, turmoil and change) and placing it back onto the same street (of cosmopolitanism, modernity and chicness) is a strategy that draws attention to the degree of contrast in today's China. It is a gesture that addresses the strides capitalism has made into a system that still professes socialism, and it demonstrates the continued envelopment of the individual in both. The head attempts to accompany China's urban changes with the same stupefaction as the changes themselves. The silence of the head on the wall becomes deafening as it is transformed into the shape of a sophisticated lightbox, and its haunting inescapability even more pronounced. It is a notion that would trace China's policy of modern urbanisation full circle and skip through the loop.

Zhang Dali's 'Dialogue' campaign does not stop here. In a performance held on a building demolition site along the 2nd Ring Road of eastern Beijing, Dali hired ten construction workers to assist him in chiselling out three freshly painted heads. The resulting holes revealed a newly built neo-Grecian office building behind the demolition site. It was a piece that turned Zhang Dali's graffiti activity into a performance, his painting into sculpture, and his dialogue with the city into an attack on its architecture.

Just as with my performance, many things are happening in this city: demolition, construction, car accidents, sex, drunkenness, and violence infiltrates every hole. In the vastness of the city, many occurrences are not clear, nor do we know their ultimate result as people are made nervous, scattered, insecure ... On the grass or hanging from tree branches, plastic bags dangle, moving with the wind as heads without souls or like gashed hands. People wearing suits walk into the main entrance of hotels and exit through the back door onto dark muddied lanes. They resemble the deer and the snake in the way they try to avoid the dirt. I choose these walls. They are the screen onto which the show of this city is projected. The screen becomes a normal, realistic working place, nothing else. Only one and a half hours. The sound of hammer and chisels. Bricks fall, stirring up clouds of dust. Behind the wall a modern, shiny mansion appears.

These spray-painted heads expose both the ruptures of Beijing's process of transformation and the psychological toll on its residents. Moreover, they pose universal questions of individuality and human relations while reaching out to the public. Whether it be with the perplexed passer-by, the general public via the recent press coverage of this phenomenon, or with the metamorphosis of Beijing itself, the dialogue the head incites is unavoidable.

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