

## Beijing's Lone Graffiti Artist

**T**o the westerner, 'graffiti' may bring to mind images of spray painted, overblown cartoon-like characters smothering the trains of the New York subway or near illegible scrawl asserting it's creator's existence in the most basic of ways: 'Rodders was 'ere'. Any empty space will do for the latter.

In Beijing there is only one choice when it comes to graffiti. In fact, up to four years ago graffiti was considered one of those Western problems that China didn't have, until one, arguably masochistic, artist took up the art form. Initially facing the risk of extreme punishment, AK-47 or 18K, as he calls himself, has spray painted more than one thousand of his signature heads in the capital city. The head is bald and shown in profile, a black outline without eyes or ears. As the artist says, it is a symbol with intense social implications. It adorns the public toilets, underpasses on Beijing's four ring roads, on railway carriages, rubbish trucks and the walls of old houses whose only other 'graffiti' is the circled X marking them for destruction in China's relentless drive to modernise. AK47 works at night, preferably in winter when there are fewer people in the streets. To record his work, he returns during the day to photograph his creations.

Zhang Dali chose the names AK47 and 18K, the first referring to the machine gun and the second to 18 carats, because of the materialism and violence he sees growing in the new China. In his opinion

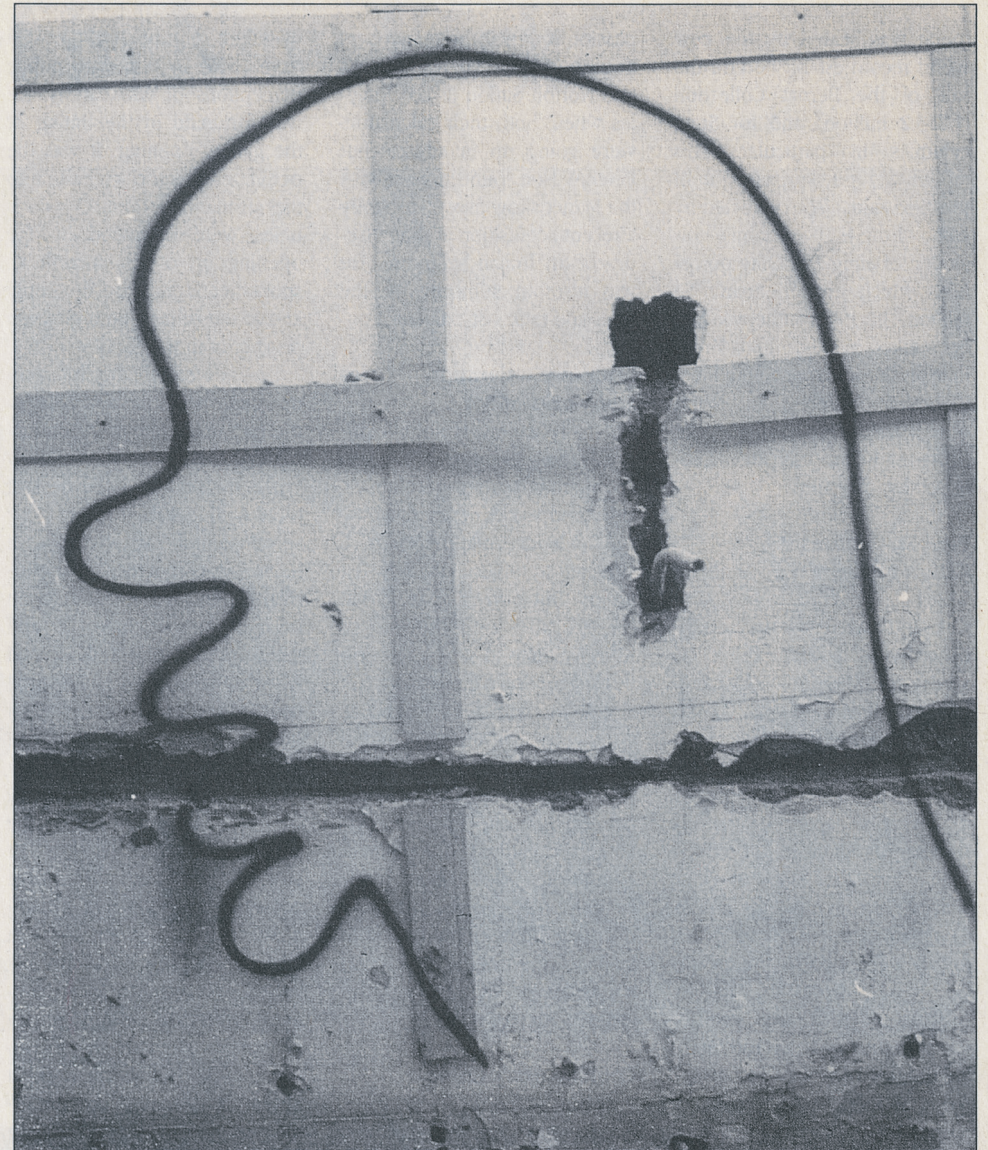
and that of many other Chinese, estrangement caused by urbanisation results in people becoming more solitary and deranged, feeding violence. He chooses walls, more often associated with sites for political slogans and in the Democracy Wall movement of 1978-79 with politics of a different kind, as the main support for his graffiti because he sees them as the screen on which the spectacle of city life is projected. Each piece of graffiti is part of an ongoing creation the artist calls 'Dialogue'. For him, art in a studio is simply a style, out on the street, 'it has meaning'. The easily identifiable symbol is his way to communicate with the other inhabitants of his city—the city he hardly recognises any more. The Chinese traditionally keep their ideas for themselves but AK47 wants his to be seen by all and expects a reaction.

A reaction he has definitely provoked. The neighbourhood committee members, whose job it is to know all that goes on in their quarter, label his work sabotage or vandalism. Local newspapers publish cries from local officials for his arrest so that, at the very least, he be made to clean the walls which have been transformed into the props for his dialogue. All this delights the artist. The newspapers have entered into the exchange and have become a means of response to his bald heads. Simply by asking what? why? and who? they are participating in AK47's dialogue.

The artist's concern with the

transformations in his city has led him to extend his work to performance art. Day after day (and not only in the capital) the characteristic neighbourhoods of Beijing are destroyed, neutralised and rebuilt to fit an international model. In front of a neon version of the bald head the artist recites: 'Just as in my life, many things are happening in this city: demolition, construction, car accidents, sex, drunkenness, and violence infiltrate 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 and insecure. Waste builds up in every corner of the city. People eat, defecate and sleep in the garbage. Children look for toys in the garbage. The water running through the city is oil black and stinking. On the grass or hanging from tree branches, plastic bags dangle, moving with the wind like heads without soul or gashed hands. People wearing starched suits are now walking into the main entrance of hotels and exiting through the back door onto dark, dirty, muddled lanes. I choose these walls that are spray painted with the image of a human head. They are the screen onto which the show of this city is projected. The screen becomes a normal realistic working place, nothing else. The sound of the hammer and chisels. Bricks fall stirring up clouds of dust. Behind the wall a modern neo-classical, shiny mansion appears.'

One Beijing resident wanted to



*Dialogue: graffiti on the streets of Beijing by Zhang Dali*

sue Zhang Dali claiming the heads depressed him to such an extent each morning that he couldn't do his work satisfactorily. The artist replies 'I know that to most people

passing by the symbol will not be recognised as art. But I hope that people living in this period of chaotic development, in danger, anxiety and violence, considering

each other as enemies, will see my symbol waving to them.'

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