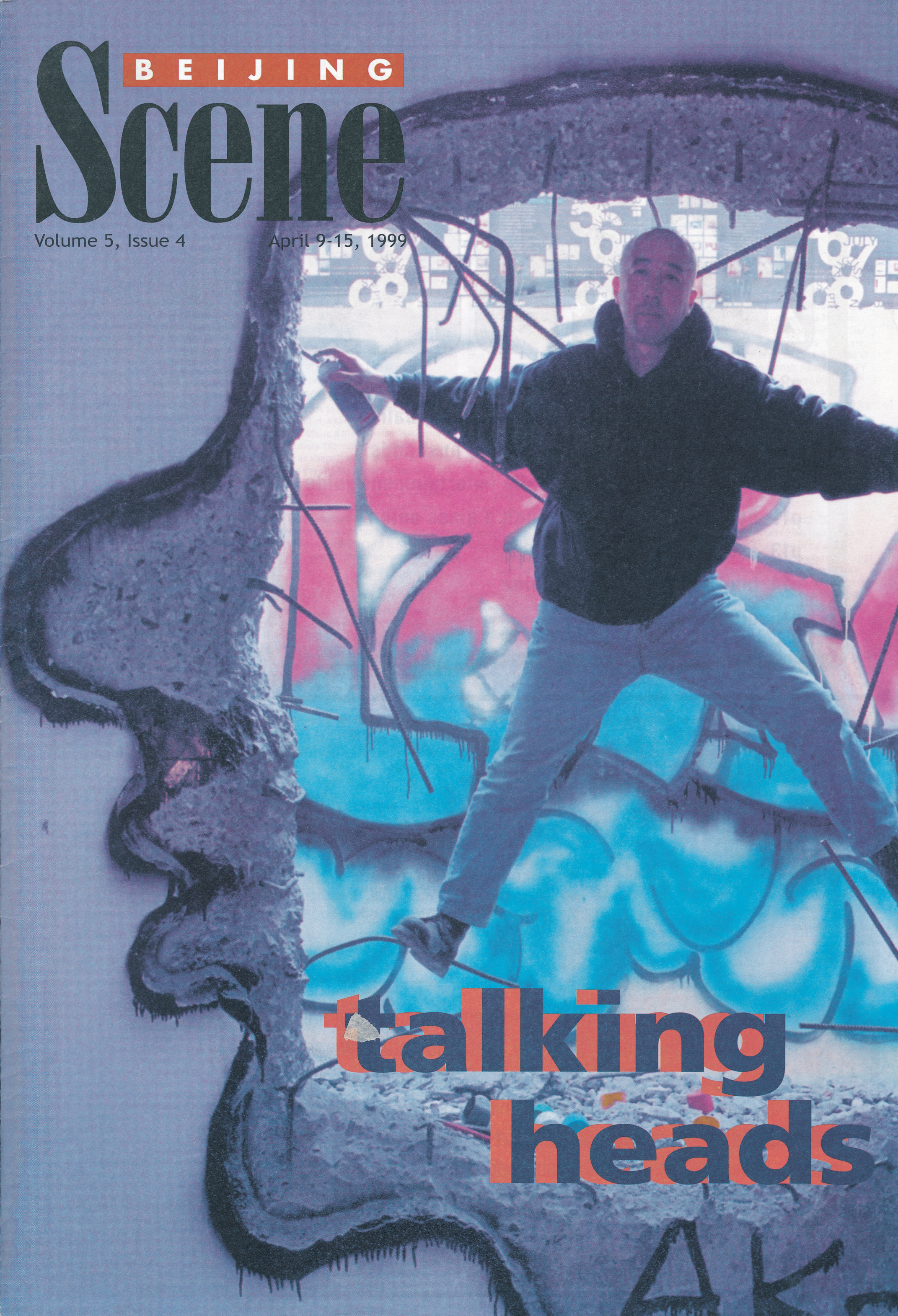


# BEIJING Scene

Volume 5, Issue 4

April 9-15, 1999



**talking  
heads**

"HOW MANY PEOPLE GO TO ART GALLERIES? EVEN IN A BIG CITY LIKE BEIJING, IT'S A TINY NUMBER. BUT ORDINARY PEOPLE SEE MY WORK EVERYDAY."—18K

# dialogue: the graffiti art of 18K

by Lyn Stuart

**I**F YOU HAVE BEEN IN Beijing long enough to get in a taxi, then you have seen his work: profiles spray-painted on condemned buildings, freeway bridges and neglected walls all over the capital. These scrawled profiles of a human head are the work of 18K (aka AK47)—the artist formerly known as Zhang Dali. You wouldn't notice them in a Western city because the simple drawings would be quickly sprayed over with graffiti done by thousands of other layabouts, vandals, artists and political groups. But Beijing has almost no graffiti and the heads compete for space only with notices telling you not to park in front of gates or dump garbage, advertisements for venereal disease remedies and the ubiquitous Chinese character 拆—chāi, indicating that the building is about to be demolished. In fact, many of 18K's tags are intentionally placed right next to "chai" characters. Not only is graffiti painted onto walls that will soon be rubble unlikely to stir the police into action, 18K also has artistic reasons for associating his heads with condemned structures: the work is an attempt to engage in a dialogue with Beijing, a city where

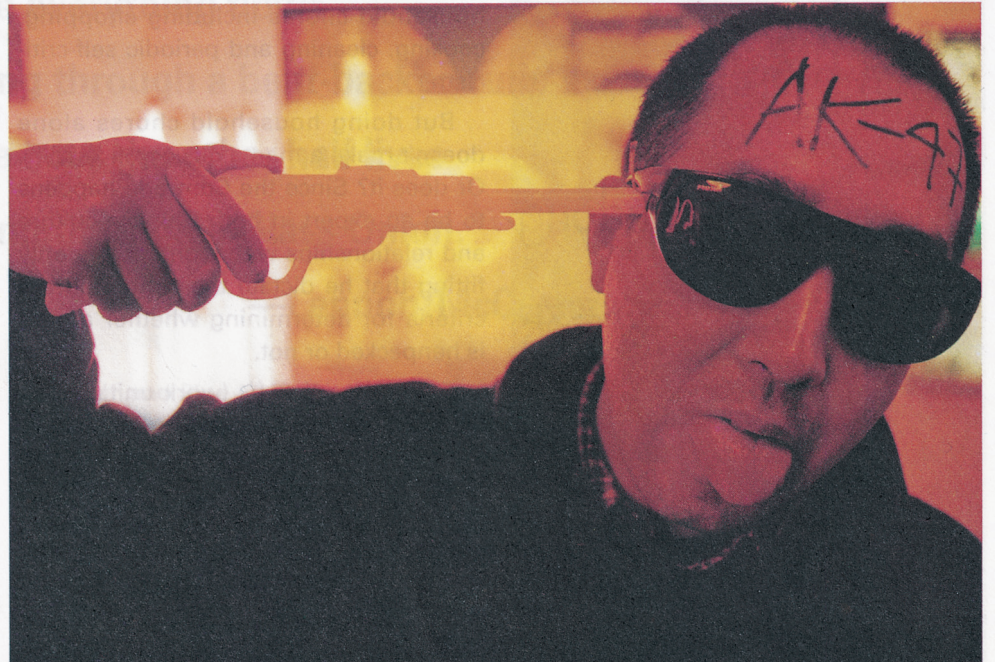
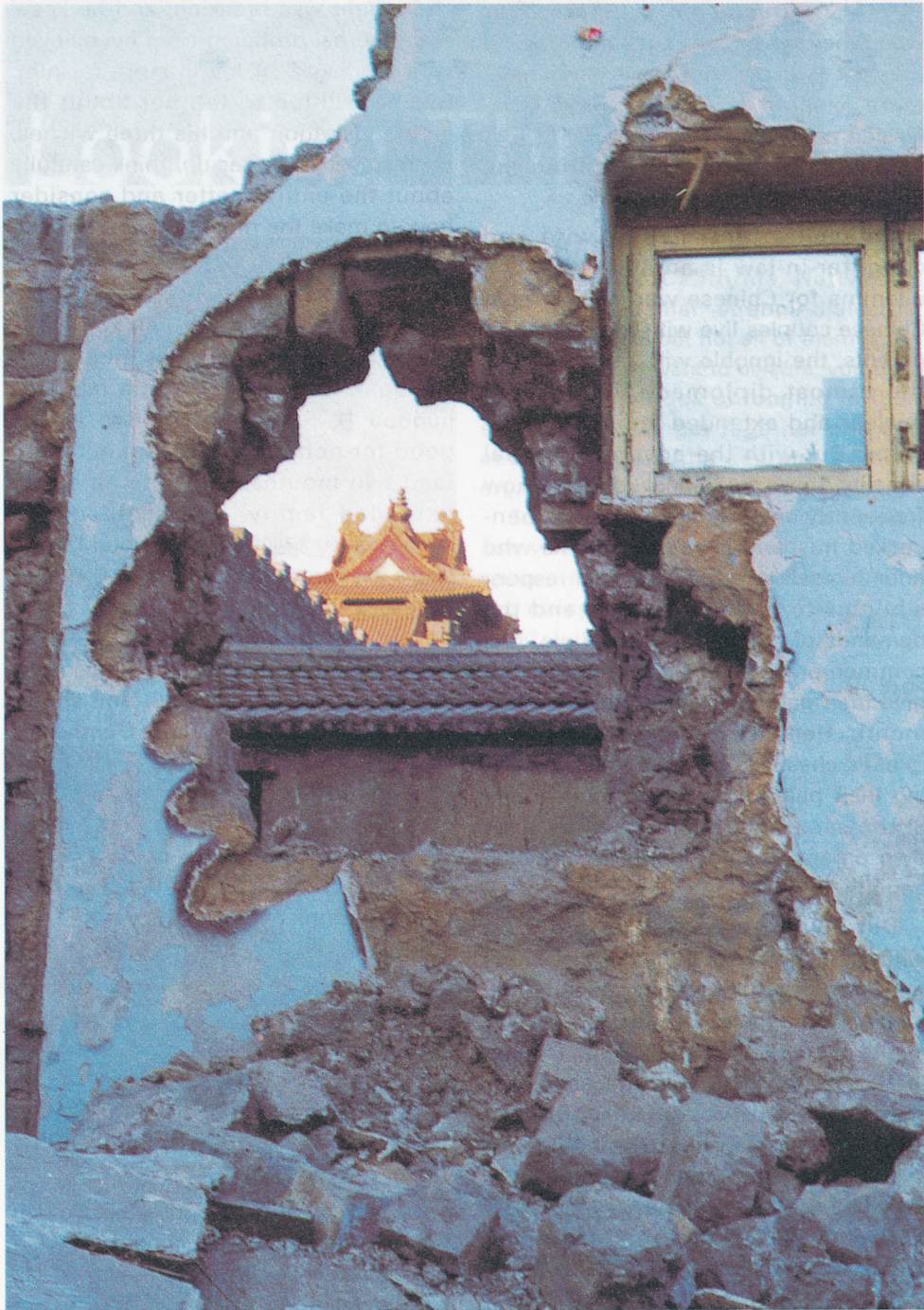
buildings come down faster than they did in wartime Berlin and London.

18K was born in Heilongjiang 36 years ago and came to Beijing after middle school to attend the prestigious Central Academy of Art and Design. He majored in traditional Chinese ink-and-brush painting but soon began producing abstract works and experimenting with different materials. In the late 1980s, 18K was the first artist to move to the village near Yuanmingyuan that later became a thriving colony of artists and bohemians until it was closed by Beijing authorities in the early 1990s. In 1988, 18K was one of several artists featured in independent filmmaker Wu Wenguang's *Bumming in Beijing* (*Liulang Beijing*). The film popularized the notion of the Chinese artist as *liulang*—a slightly dangerous type of hipster who exists on the fringe of normal society and is frowned on by Communist cultural czars. Like many young people involved in the arts, 18K left Beijing in 1989. He went to Italy where he spent six years living in different cities and working as an artist. On his return to Beijing in 1993 he conceived of his long running graffiti project which he entitles *Dialogue* because the intention is that the graffiti along with photographs and articles that document and

criticize it will together comprise a dialogue about the changing face of Beijing.

18K lives with his family in a traditional courtyard house in central Beijing. On a recent visit his daughter is doing homework in the room next door. An *ayi* pours tea for us. It is a very normal, even conservative-looking household, except for the shelves stacked with contemporary art books in Italian, Chinese and English. But 18K takes me into a room on the west side of the courtyard. We step through the wooden door and he switches on the lights. Lightboxes displaying photographs of the *Dialogue* project illuminate the room. Snakes of pink neon sketching out two *Dialogue* heads flicker and light up. The walls are hung with photographs, light installations, posters and newspaper articles documenting 18K's project. We talk about the works as I stroll around the room.

18K was one of the most commercially successful modern Chinese painters before 1989. He was among the first mainland painters to play visual games with Chinese characters and his abstract works painted with traditional Chinese materials sold well enough for him to afford to leave the country. I ask why he



gave up the almost respectable occupation of painting on paper and canvas in order to practice a dubious art that many consider borderline vandalism.

"In the 1990s, art has transcended the limits of aesthetics (*meixue*). It's not a question anymore of whether something is beautiful or not. My art is conceptual: it asks questions about the basic problems of existence. Anyway, painting has an extremely limited effect on society. How many people go to art galleries? Even in a big city like Beijing, it's a tiny percentage. But ordinary people see my work everyday, and it makes some of them think about what it means to live in an urban environment. It is like an exchange of ideas with the people who live in this city."

A large lightbox mounted on the wall catches my eye. The front of the box is a photograph of a wall with a hole neatly bashed into it. It looks as though 18K's signature head was thrown like a cartoon character through the brick and cement wall, leaving an exact outline.

So what does this defacer and destroyer of walls think of the destruction of the *hutongs* and courtyards that were once the heart of Beijing?

"Old houses should be preserved: they are part of the history and the story of a

city. The old houses are the city's roots and they are important to our cultural life. Rome is a modern city but they have still preserved some of the oldest buildings. Just moving a bunch of peasants into a highrise apartment does not make a modern city."

I want to ask 18K if he considers himself a vandal, but there is no accurate translation for this contemporary urban concept in Mandarin. So I ask the artist if he considers his work a kind of pollution (*wuran*).

"No, aside from the air, the real pollution in this city is the large number of ugly buildings. The buildings on Chang'an Boulevard are all built in different styles, but the one thing they have in common is their unsightliness. They have a significant effect on the surrounding area—they block the sunlight, they don't leave enough green spaces between the buildings, they make the general environment seem unfriendly and unpleasant."

Beijing, like Paris, has always been a city planned around perceptions of power. The Communists were not willing to give up the Imperial city plan with the Forbidden City at the physical and figurative heart of Beijing; after 1949 the corridors of power were just moved

"Aside from the **air**, the real pollution in this city is the large number of **ugly buildings**."

south to the buildings around Tiananmen Square. Chang'an Boulevard is a wide and inhuman road that slices Beijing in half. It is lined with big smug buildings that seem designed to put down the hopes of anyone with spirit enough to say "I am an individual, and I can influence my environment." 18K's scrawls are the very opposite of those buildings. In a city of faceless glass and white tiles where asbestos panda bears pass for art, 18K's heads serve as a reminder that it is possible for an individual to make a mark on a society seemingly opposed to spontaneity and light-hearted self-reflection. ★