

AK-47

A Modern Artist



Story and Photos by Michael Reynolds

An interview with the man behind the face on every street corner



Photos: top, Zhang Dali (a.k.a. AK-47) in person, and above, the many manifestations of alter-ego AK-47's street art, in dialogue with ordinary Beijingers who may not realise it's art

Spray-painted heads have appeared on every spare corner of walls in China's big cities—highly stylized profiles of a person with improbably large lips and a jutting chin. You've probably seen every day, even if you've not registered them. They're scrawled across the walls of back alleys, bridges, and compounds throughout the urban sprawl, imposing in their sheer abundance.

The profiles have become synonymous with the Chinese character *chai* (to demolish), spray-painted on buildings targeted for wrecking balls sent by Beijing's city planners. Often as not, the profiles and the *chai* character are painted side by side. So who's the kid on the block behind the graffiti?

ARTIST OR GRAFFITI?

Zhang Dali is no teen vandal, but a pensive 38-year-old. He explains his actions with an ease that comes from long practice of defending his trademark artistic style. "My graffiti is part of an ongoing work of art I call *Dialogue*," says Zhang. "I've made thousands of them in Beijing since 1995. The series is a dialogue between me, the people, and the changing environment of the city."

Harbin-native Zhang's close-cropped hair and uncomplicated features could almost make him his own model. He says his work is a protest against what he describes as the "here today, gone tomorrow" nature of Beijing's hyperactive modernization. "Real modernization is in the mind," he asserts. "New York, Rome, Paris and Hong Kong—these cities are modern and

beautiful, with lots of small, old houses. And the people living in those homes are modern." Zhang stresses his point with an analogy: "If you drive an expensive car dangerously, but I drive a cheap car safely, who is more modern?"

His dialogue with Beijingers takes the form of a face, underscored with the legends "18K" and "AK-47", the 18-karat gold of the people and the modern economy alongside elements of violence within the society. AK-47 he adopted as a pseudonym, in reference to the lethal weapon of the same moniker.

FINDING HIS WAY

A graduate of the prestigious Central Academy of Art and Design, Zhang says he believes it was his credible fine art training that meant authorities were prepared to turn a blind eye to his streetside *Dialogue*, when he began daubing Beijing streets in 1995. "I think they decided to tolerate me when they discovered that I had an education," he laughs, "and that I wasn't part of an underground society."

The idea for *Dialogue* came during a seven-year stay Bologna, Italy, funded through the sale of his post-graduation paintings. He returned to Beijing, along with his wife and young children, to continue his work on the streets.

Zhang is flippant about any skepticism over the artistic value of his daubs. "I don't care what people think of my work," says Zhang. "If 100 people dislike my art, and three like it... should I stop? That's impossible."

It seems that there are more than three people who like his work, however. Far from being an underground artist, Zhang rapidly became one of the Chinese mainland's most saleable artists—surprising, considering most of his art took the form of impromptu scribbles on soon-to-be destroyed walls. A photograph he took became the front cover for US magazine *Newsweek's* January 2000 issue, and his catalogue includes exhibitions across Asia, North America, and Europe. Zhang often photographs his spray-paint profiles, and scans them onto canvases and installs them in neon reliefs and light boxes the size of tabletops.

NEW FACES

Zhang acknowledges that his *Dialogue* won't go on forever, and says he'll "probably continue for about four more years." As a performance artist and sculptor, he's already got a credible portfolio of other, more diverse works, and he hopes to move more in new directions.

His latest project, entitled *One Hundred Chinese Heads*, was begun in April last year, and takes the form of molds of the heads of 100 migrant workers. "The migrants flood into cities like Beijing and Shanghai in search of work," explains Zhang. "Their lives are very hard... but they don't realize how much potential power their massive number has." Ten of the heads from the series are scheduled for inclusion in the Arco Exhibition, Madrid, in February, before traveling on to the Contemporary Chinese Gallery in London.

Zhang admits that, in spite of the overridingly Beijing nature of his work, his main audience is still overseas. "Most people in this country have never even been to an exhibition of modern art," he says. "How could I possibly expect them to understand it? One of the main reasons I place my art outdoors is to let people know that they can dislike my work, but they must realize that this is art."

Certainly, his work is impossible to miss. **CW**

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