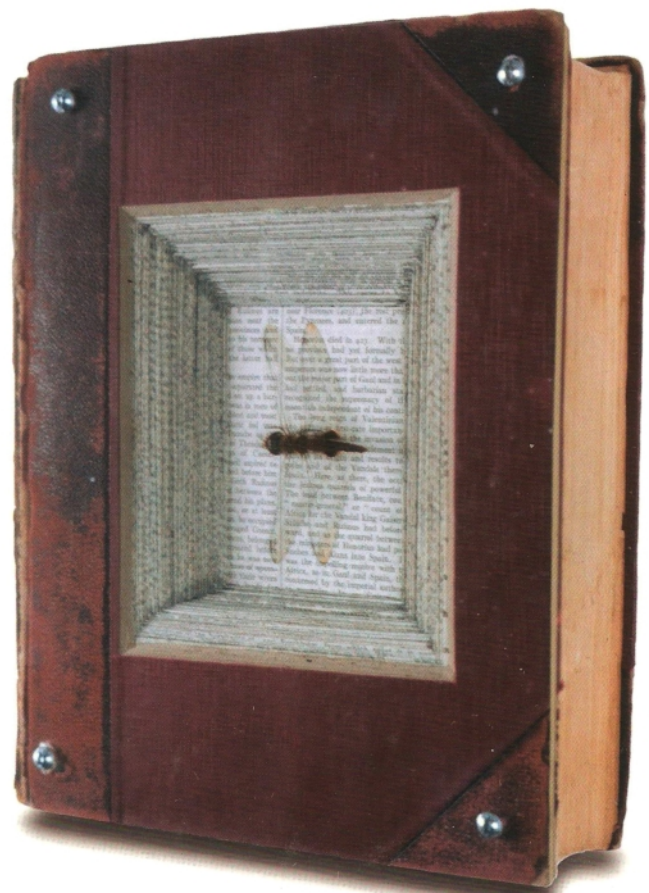


ART PRACTICE AS RESEARCH

INQUIRY
IN
THE
VISUAL
ARTS



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different visions, and the creative task is to create forms of representation that have the capacity to reveal, critique, and transform what we know. This is characteristic of *making in cultures* as artists who pursue a resistant art practice make full use of the potential of visual images to help reveal critical understandings about issues of human concern. The Chinese artist Zhang Dali uses his distinctive visual signature of a profile of a human head to mark up buildings throughout Beijing slated for demolition in the wake of rapid modernization. Zhang Dali uses two forms of graffiti he describes as *Dialogues* and *Demolitions* as a way to alert citizens about the loss of Chinese cultural identity. Dialogues are outlines spray-painted on walls; whereas Demolitions are chiseled and chipped profiles that cut holes in the walls to reveal traditional or contemporary buildings in the background. These empty images are enigmatic reminders of the human scale that was so prominent in the courtyard communities of Beijing.

The task of the artist-theorist within this cultural context therefore is to investigate how image makers and meaning makers come to know the things they do. Obviously the image-based researcher also creates and interprets visual information so a central consideration is to address the need to be critical in assessing how researchers themselves make meanings. This critical imperative implies that the visual image is more than a product that can be isolated or contextualized. Rather, a different set of theoretical parameters is needed to fully understand the way images reveal insights and understandings. This principle is accepted by art historians and cultural theorists who understand the dynamic, interpretive relationships among the object, creator, viewer, and related cultural, political, and institutional regimes that influence how knowledge is both constructed and made problematic (Bal, 1996; Heywood & Sandywell, 1999; Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). Furthermore, the status and meaning of the “visual” undergoes continual change as various means and ends are invoked within the workings of the interpretive communities that surround the visual arts. These discontinuities are evident in the different historical and sociocultural patterns of practice of art writing, art historical inquiry, and curatorial practice.

In considering how art writers and cultural critics respond to traditions and practices of *making in cultures*, it is in relationships rather than images or objects where value is located. It is within the ensemble of art making, interpretive scope, critical perspective, institutional constraints, and cultural influences that meanings are both made manifest and made problematic. In other words, what artists and other communities and collectives create is taken up by art writers and interrogated and repositioned within broader regimes of thought. This cycle of critical analysis continually expands as the robust quality of visual arts can be interpreted with reference to different



Mathieu Borysevicz (1999) describes Zhang Dali's *Dialogue* series this way:

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 theater of the street, a shadow cast by China's tremendous population where emergence from the crowd is not only discouraged but is logistically impossible. The 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. (p. 10)

Zhang Dali. *Dialogues*, Spray-painted buildings, Beijing. Reproduced courtesy of the artist. Photograph by Graeme Sullivan.

aesthetic, social, political, and educational ends. The status of the art image or object is therefore best appreciated if seen to be a cultural practice whose genesis is generative of personal and public meaning when opened up to critical discourse by the art writer.

Within this interpretive space where the visual image is squeezed of new meanings, certain canons are disrupted much in the same way that newer reflexive methods of research show up prescribed practices as unable to cope with the complex realities of today. In her investigations of visual culture, Mieke Bal (1996), for instance, dislodges the idea of causality as it is normally