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ZHANG DALI: THE FACE OF CHINA

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After the specter of Tian'anmen in 1989, Zhang Dali, accompanied by his Italian wife, moved to Bologna. Upon his return to China in 1995, he began his graffiti works, scrawling his profile with spray paint across the buildings of Beijing. Like the graffiti found in urban centres such as New York, Los Angeles, Paris, and elsewhere, Zhang's interventions carry a complicated message.[1] Firstly, they are acts of vandalism, highlighting urban ruin, in which he disfigures old buildings that are marked for demolition in order to make way for the erection of sterile modern commercial ventures. Secondly, they are social protest, acts of public expression as well as of self-affirmation: Beijing has been populated with the artist's image. Proof of his effectiveness in irritating the municipal powers is their failed efforts to find the author of these urban signatures. Having made two thousand works throughout the city, Zhang laughingly explains that they discovered his identity but never caught him in the act.

Zhang Dali, *Demolition and Dialogue, Forbidden City (Beijing)*, 1998. Courtesy of the artist.

As a street artist, Zhang Dali originally took the moniker of AK-47. His fascination with the Russian assault weapon of the same name—the choice of urban guerrillas and a symbol of the street violence of modern society—informed his work in 2000. In performances, Zhang and others under his direction dressed in military jump suits and gas masks, then acted out the violence of using assault weapons by spraying naked participants with red paint or black paint. In his paintings, Zhang created a continuous net consisting of the written expression "AK-47," which he superimposed on large-scale, realistic portraits of migrant workers. Executed in black and white or red on red acrylic on vinyl, the paintings portray individual characters who are constrained or negated by violence. The staccato design of numbers and letters suggests the rat-tat-tat-tat of the weapon being fired. It is as if the workers' faces, impassive and wide-eyed, were being cancelled out or imprisoned by this symbolic phrase representing death and destruction.

Zhang Dali, *AK-47 (16)*, 2001, acrylic on vinyl, 150 x 150 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Zhang Dali, *Min Gong (Itinerant Worker), February 17, 2000,* Chinese food in gel, metal plate, 30 x 25 x 25 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Social circumstances in Beijing have changed and have influenced Zhang's art. Since 1999 he has been experimenting with figurative sculpture. Among his first efforts was a human head cast in animal glue and meat, rich in connotations. Like medieval death masks fashioned in Europe, this head served as a memorial portrait. But it is severed from the body and rests on a plate. In this context, the work seems to refer specifically to Western depictions of the decapitated head of St. John the Baptist, offered on a platter to satisfy the demanding temptress Salome. A morality tale such as this one, with its capitulation of virtue to whims of licentiousness is hardly unknown to the artist, as he has spent so much time in Bologna; in fact he has Italian citizenship. Partially made of meat, the severed head is also suggestive of animal slaughter, bringing to mind stockyards and cannibalism. Placed on a platter for presentation, it further alludes to a feature of great European banquets—the dressed pig.

Other layers of meaning are generated from the process of decomposition that the piece undergoes. Made from unstable materials, the head literally dissolves within 3 or 4 days, illustrating the transience of human existence and the inevitable disintegration of the corpse. Chaim Soutine's *Carcass of Beef* inevitably comes to mind.[2] But Zhang's work, entitled *Min Gong (Itinerant Worker)*, makes a poignant reference to the marginal existence of China's impoverished migrant workers who populate the outskirts of Beijing, a theme that becomes especially important in his later works.

For the most part these macabre associations are not present in the later series of portrait heads made from resin. This project of over one hundred cast heads took over two years to complete. The first nine were on exhibition in the winter of 2001 at Chinese Contemporary, a gallery in London and, in 2003, upon completion of the remaining ninety-one cast heads, *One Hundred Chinese* was exhibited and published in a catalogue in Beijing.[3] Measuring 30 x 25 x 25 cm, each head replicates the Chinese physiognomy in all of its diversity and unity. These, like the works in the *AK-47* series, are portraits of migrant workers, who were paid to participate in the project and who varied in age and physical attributes. Each head is thus unique in size and shape, in the angle at which the head is supported on the neck, and in its facial features. Unified by the closed eyes

necessary to complete each cast with the mould method (it takes about twenty minutes for the resin to harden), each face has a dreamy countenance. Yet the heads also convey individuality through the setting of the mouth, expressive eyes, and furrowed eyebrows that imbue the faces with a variety of moods—passivity, reflection, meditative calm, grim determination, or physical discomfort. Once the moulding process is completed, the surface is left unfinished. In effect, the castings are not immaculate: each head is roughly edged at the bottom, where the cloth is left fringed and ragged. Some heads have an irregularly shaped piece of cloth draped over the forehead. Bits of resin may cling to the eyes, lips, nose, and, especially, the eyebrows. That these sculptures are not polished or refined adds a dimension of time to the work—a feeling that the pieces are in continuous evolution.

When installed in a gallery, the horizontally aligned heads take on a linear rhythm derived from their idiosyncratic features. The installation conveys a contradiction: one perceives the mass population of China while at the same time noting the particularity of its people. Nearly monochromatic, these visually subdued forms are displayed like the archaeological finds of a lost society. Political and spiritual meanings also infuse the work. In an essay written for the 2003 catalogue, Zhang is very forthright in his articulation of the plight of a large part of the Chinese population that exists under the enormous strain of rapid and tumultuous commercialization. These migrant workers live on the fringe of society, having abandoned rural outposts for the unfulfilled promise of a good life in the city. Finding themselves disenfranchised and without heath or welfare benefits, they rent their bodies out for cheap labour. The casting process took place on the outskirts of Beijing, where the migrants come to wait for work, just like the millions of day workers without skills and proper work permits who exist throughout the world. As Zhang describes their situation:

> These fellow countrymen of mine endure every kind of oppression, both physical and spiritual, on their bodies and their minds for their entire lives. They surely don't lack a certain vulgarity of feelings, yet nevertheless they have a kind of soul's apathy. When they are in the face of power, they exhibit mean slyness that only fear can dictate. They have learnt how to humiliate themselves in order to survive and procreate. With patience they endure discrimination, trying to sweeten the suffering of their bodies with minimal leisure and tiny consolations. They have no way to protect themselves with dignity. . . . I know well that I have been looking for personality hidden behind faces without personality, hidden behind a plain and opaque story composed of personal compromises.[4]

Zhang Dali, *One Hundred Chinese*, 2002. Courtesy of the artist.

Zhang attributes their difficult circumstances to government policy, but this problem, the everlasting story of a have and have-not society, exists worldwide. Though universal, the problem seems particularly extreme in a society which only a few decades ago was dedicated to the proper and equitable distribution of life-sustaining social services to all its citizens. Zhang explains the current refusal of the Chinese government to address the situation:

> Today the state self-confidently proclaims that the jobless people are those who cannot adapt themselves to the type of knowledge and skills necessary to the new economy. No one dares to say that the impediments come directly from the problem of power. The state spends an enormous amount of time to transform the iniquity of politics in the progress of society. A false image is created that the political problem does not exist at the low levels of society, having already been infused by the atmosphere of the new economy.[5]

Continuing with the theme of the portrait of China in its unity and diversity, Zhang decided to extend the process to full-body casts, with a projected count of five hundred naked individuals, both male and female. This ambitious project illustrates how the invisible day workers of China depend on their bodies for survival by engaging in menial, mindless jobs that sap their strength. Nakedness is not acceptable in China and, exposing the body is traditionally considered a humiliation. Naked figures are entirely absent from Chinese art; even in pornography, the body is clothed. Thus Zhang's pallid resin forms mirror these sad lives whose exposed bodies are commodities sold in the open market. Zhang is deeply disturbed by the difficulties facing this population existing on the fringe of the financially secure and complacent inhabitants of Beijing.

Zhang Dali, *One Hundred Chinese, No. 34*, resin, 30 x 25 x 25 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Casting *One Hundred Chinese* in the artist's studio, August 18, 2003. Courtesy of the artist.

The women are prostitutes. Subject to physical demands as sex workers, they are also vulnerable to abuse of their bodies and spirits, to the whims and perversities of clients, pimps, and mafia henchmen, to sexually transmitted disease and addiction, to police rousting and imprisonment. These street-walkers, younger and older, cheaper, "less fresh meat," (in Zhang's words) are lined up as if in a police display of corpses.[6] Entitled *Race*, the members of this quotidian portrait of Beijing society are, ironically, stamped, like manufactured commodities, with their names, the date, the title of the piece, and the artist's signature.

Zhang Dali, *Race*, resin, 2003. Courtesy of the artist.

Another work, *Chinese Offspring*, which has been displayed in an industrial warehouse, presents the figures suspended upside-down from hooks; the similarity to butchered animals is alarming. Some figures, with traces of red, suggest violent acts. At the China Contemporary Gallery in London in 2004, a few of the figures were suspended from the ceiling, and along the wall was a crouching figure.[7]

These works function as a physical diary that documents aspects of the Chinese experience. On the most apparent level they record and display the hardships of disenfranchised members of Chinese society. Though the role of the artist as a representative of social conscience has deep roots in ancient Chinese culture, most notably in the poems of the beloved eighth-century Tang poet Du Fu, who chronicled the privations of life in the capital during political chaos, recording human suffering and destitution is largely unfamiliar in the Chinese pictorial arts. Exceptions may be cited, such as the outstanding example by Zhou Chen, *Beggars and Street Characters*, a group of album leaves dated 1516, which delineate the bedraggled, skeletal street people of Ming China.[8] In contrast, socially conscious art is not without ample precedent in the West, for example, in the art of Goya, Daumier, and Picasso. Mention must also be made of China's socialist works of art that document deprivations suffered under capitalism, such as the cast-clay sculptural tableau of the *Rent Collection Courtyard* of 1965, a collective work showing impoverished, emaciated, exhausted tenants offering their meagre rents to a blasé landlord.[9]

In looking at Zhang's portraits, precedents in modern Western art come to mind. For example, Andy Warhol's images that frame (to use Marshall McLuhan's terms) "hot" or violent events in a "cool" medium are evoked. Warhol's variegated silkscreen renderings treat the electric chair as if it were a neutral subject—a still life or a landscape. Like Warhol, Zhang presents his subjects in serial form. In addition, Zhang's images may be viewed in the context of both performance art and media culture. His work comments on our complacency with the effects of modern media, where television and computer screens throughout the world project brutal scenes of human carnage while we idly sit and watch.

Zhang Dali, *Chinese Offspring*, 2003, resin. Courtesy of the artist.

In technique and content, George Segal's oeuvre is also clearly an important precedent. Segal produced pristine, full-size plaster casts of individuals engaged in such daily activities as bathing, dressing, and working. Moreover, Segal included actual fragments of the environment in the works. In *Man Leaving a Bus*, of 1961, a small section of the front of a bus is included in the installation. In *Bus Driver*, of 1962, the subject sits behind the steering wheel enclosed by the low metal partition. And in *The Dinner Table*, also of 1962, four of the six figures are seated at a round wooden table on which sits is a plate.[10] While Segal's sculptures are a ghostly matte white, the props, which are found objects, are polychrome and made of a variety of materials. Later, Segal made his tableaux more complicated and began to colour his casts. Another sculptor, John Ahearn, similarly produced several series of plaster or fiberglass life-casts. Born in Binghamton, New York in 1951, Ahearn settled in the South Bronx, and it was there that he began his casts of his friends and neighbours.[11] First exhibited in 1980, the sculptures record impoverished neighbourhood characters on their street corners. With the assistance of Rigoberto Torres, the casts were actually made on the street. Unlike Zhang's works, these works were meticulously finished with a great amount

of detail in the costumes and were often displayed as public art. Mention should also be made of the photorealist sculptor Duane Hanson, who made hyper-realistic sculptures of people from all walks of life, each detail of their person and clothing scrupulously recreated.[12] His characters are startlingly realistic, and although the works ennoble the characters by selecting them for creation as art objects, the figures, shown "warts and all," are most often sad portrayals of overweight, balding, bloated individuals. In all of these Western examples the figures are shown dressed, with meticulous attention to portraying with exactitude the particularities of each of the figures' appearance, pose, and setting.

Zhang claims none of these precedents came to mind in his execution of *One Hundred Chinese*, and his works do generate a different impression. Zhang's portraits are infused with a strong essence of human struggle. Although low in social standing, his subjects are ennobled in his recording of their existence. The specificity and the vastness of the Chinese population, and, by extension, the world population, are evoked. Recreated here is the universal experience of urban life in which one may enjoy individuality in daily existence while at the same time forming part of a nameless crowd.

Zhang's sensitive and nuanced portraits of China chronicle daily life. Intended as a portrayal of China, his work also encompasses the universal ills of urban life. Beyond its apparent social critique and cry for reform, Zhang's work is a tender portrait of his neighbours and of the frailty of human existence.

Notes

1 Born in Harbin, China in 1963, Zhang graduated from the National Academy of Fine Arts and Design, in Beijing where he now he lives and works. Zhang Dali's works may be seen on the Web at www.chinesecontemporary.com.

2 Chaim Soutine, *Carcass of Beef*, 1926, in The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, inv. no 57.12, oil on canvas, 45.75 x 31.75 in.

3 Zhang Dali, *One Hundred Chinese* catalogue (Beijing: Beijing Jiaxin Dayishuyinshu you Liangongsi zhiban), 2003.

4 Ibid., 7.

5 Ibid., 10.

6 Interview with the artist in his apartment in Beijing, August 18, 2003.

7 Michael Gover, "Breaking down a Chinese wall," *Review Financial Times* (London), Friday, June 25, 2004.

8 James Cahill, *Parting at the Shore* (New York: Weatherhill, 1978): 168, figs. 88–89. now in the Honolulu Academy of Arts.

9 Maria Galikowski, *Art and Politics in China 1949–1984* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1998), fig 10, 122ff. Comprising 114 clay figures executed by members and students of the Sichuan Academy of Fine Art, the tableau was a reenactment of an event that transpired in Sichuan in 1949.

10 Phyllis Tuchman, *Segal* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1983), figs. 16, 18, and 19.

11 http://www.alexanderandbonin.com/exhibitions/ahearn/2000/ahearn2.html.

12 http://artcyclopedia.com/artists/hanson_duane.html. See Katherine Plake Hough ed., *Duane Hanson* (Palm Springs Desert Museum, 2001).