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“It is

Art”

The Wooster Collective discovers groundbreaking art amidst rapid development in Beijing.
text & photos: SARA SCHILLER AND MARC SCHILLER

Any society's search for "the latest thing" will yield interesting results. But in China, the most populated country in the world, the result seems to be rapid demolition. Old Beijing, for instance, is being torn down and replaced by modern skyscrapers at an astonishing pace. For the emerging middle-class of Beijing, a modern economy has given birth to newly built skyscrapers with names like Upper East Side and Manhattan Towers.

The changes have become prime inspiration for a growing number of avant-garde artists. The new wave of Chinese artists is documenting, commenting on, and expressing the complex feelings that emerge from such rapid and unabashed growth through their art. These powerful emotions generate moving images. Chinese contemporary art is going through a renaissance and creating an exploding art market that is being consumed almost entirely by foreigners. What's the allure? We traveled to Beijing to find out.

On our first day there, we discovered one of the most interesting artist communities found anywhere in the world. The Dashanzi Art district is located in a suburb just outside of Beijing and embodies the current play between Communism and culture in modern China.

Dashanzi has a fascinating history. During the rise of the Communist era, a secret industrial complex was created to develop high-tech weapons of war on behalf of the Germans. The workers and their families lived their entire lives in this complex. They worked, attended school, and participated in concerts all without ever leaving the guarded walls. For the era, this was great living. It meant guaranteed jobs and housing and relatively interesting cultural activities.

In 1997, decades after the factory complex was abandoned, a lone bookstore that carried Western books on contemporary art moved in. As the bookstore drew patrons a couple artists followed suit and opened studios. Over time, the

lure of inexpensive open space attracted more and more artists. Now, the Dashanzi Arts district nurtures a world-class collection of galleries, artist's studios, chic restaurants, bars, small clothing shops, and, in a nod to the compound's industrial past, a few light manufacturing businesses. [Despite this vibrancy, Dashanzi was recently targeted to be demolished in order to make room for more skyscrapers. Just in the nick of time, Beijing was awarded the 2008 Olympics. Dashanzi was given a second chance as the Chinese government decided at the eleventh hour to keep the space open as part of a cultural center for the Games.]

A walk around the four-block industrial complex reveals wonderful discoveries. Venture down a long, dark, corridor and you'll find a beautiful car6. Down a cool, dirty, street populated by the occasional forklift, illumination from a storefront draws you into a gallery's opening-night party with hundreds of people sipping wine in plastic cups.



Our first stop in Dashanzi was the Contemporary Chinese Art Gallery, which had just opened three weeks before. Hung upside-down from the ceiling were plaster human forms created by the artist Zhang Dali. At the gallery we met Erica Fusosa, a spirited Italian who spoke Chinese and worked at the gallery. When we told Erica how much we liked the Zhang Dali bodies she kindly offered to take us to his studio space on her day off later in the week.

Erica gave us a map of Dashanzi and we began to explore. The low-lying buildings have so many little alleyways and paths that it could take

days to cover all of the studios and galleries. Down one path we came to a bookstore that had one of the largest collections of Chinese and Western art books around. This was the bookstore that was Dashanzi's origin. The one-story buildings have large skylights that capture the perfect painting light. Made mainly from concrete and brick, they are reminiscent of the Communist past that gave birth to them.

Eventually we found Gallery 798, the best known space in Dashanzi. An enormous concrete loft space with natural skylights, 798 still has some of the original equipment that was



used to manufacture the war-time radio parts. Inside we found life-size red wax figures of monks walking underneath the stairs as well as larger-than-life photographs of the faces of Chinese women. After having a bottle of wine and a plate of cheese in the small cafe at the back of Gallery 798 we wandered out of this quiet oasis back into the hustle of the modern Chinese city.

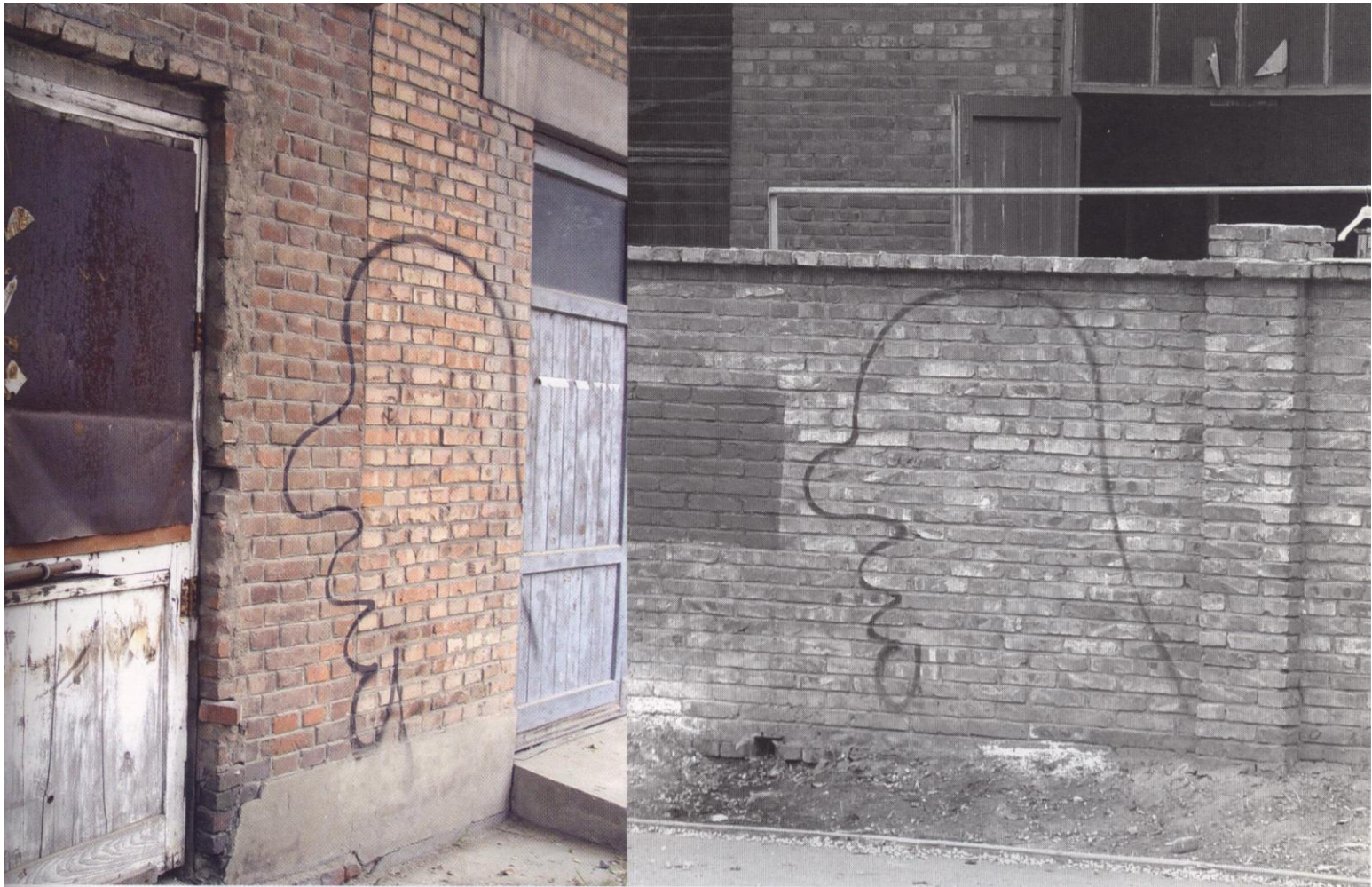
As promised, Erica brought us to see Zhang Dali. On the walls of his studio, a picture of Pamela Anderson was tacked up, and the smell of stale cigarettes lingered in the air. Over fresh

tea and cigarettes, Zhang Dali spoke in Italian to Erica, who translated his words into English. Unusual for most Chinese, Zhang Dali rived and met his wife in Bologna, Italy, in the early 1990s.

Our excitement to meet the artist in his studio was difficult to contain. We had prepared questions to ask him, but once inside, our conversation was guided more by instinct than by plan. Though he had an easy smile, his voice was low and reserved. We were unsure if our questions were breaking cultural norms, or, if they were simply intriguing to him.



It is clear that Zhang Dali feels the pain of the workers while knowing that this change cannot be stopped. He speaks to us slowly and sadly, his voice encompassing the pain of a village.



Although Zhang Dali is not the only artist in Beijing, he is certainly the only one to express his artwork using the streets as his canvas. In 1995, when aerosol spray paint cans were almost impossible to come by in China, Zhang Dali was hitting the Beijing streets hard with a quick tag of his self-portrait. Dali continues to paint his face in the same manner, most often on ancient walls that are about to be demolished to make way for modernization. Often, Dali will take out a chisel and hammer to carve out massive self-portraits in crumbling plaster walls, creating three-dimensional images that show the modern city encroaching on the old. As any good street artist would, he gets out his Yashica FX-3 and documented almost all of his work.

With throngs of people walking about during the day, he does his work early in the morning. Once, when he was stopped by the police and accused of making political statements, his response was simple: "It is art."

Zhang Dali's studio work is also influenced by the streets of Beijing. With the demolition of neighborhoods comes the influx of the Chinese migrant worker who both performs the

destruction and builds the new. The migrant worker is caught between two Chinas. They come from the countryside, where farming has not changed in centuries, to the city for work and money to send home to build a better life. They have no power, no address, no healthcare. These people are not counted by the Chinese government.

Zhang Dali explained to us that he spends much of his time walking the streets peering into the eyes of these workers, discovering where they sleep and gaining an understanding of their place in the world. It is clear that Zhang Dali feels the pain of the workers while knowing that this change cannot be stopped. He speaks to us slowly and sadly, his voice encompassing the pain of a village.

Over the years, Zhang Dali has taken portraits of countless migrant workers and then created large-scale canvases with the words AK-47 forming the workers' faces. The AK-47 symbolizes the West, destruction, and most of all, violence. Zhang Dali says that the migrant worker has a lot of violence in their lives as they are unsure of their house and their job. "Every day,

you can see the violence in the face of the people," he says. The plaster casts we saw hanging upside down from the ceiling of the Chinese Contemporary Gallery are also images of the migrant worker. In addition to creating a beautiful, mysterious imagery, they symbolize how difficult it is for the migrant worker to turn his world right-side-up.

When we asked Zhang Dali where he would most want to live in the world, his answer was simple: "Beijing, China." Even though he has been the sole voice on the street critiquing his culture, society and government, this intriguing artist wants to stay right where he is, in Beijing, watching and commentating on his culture. He is an apt role model for all artists in Beijing today, whatever their media.

above: street tags by AK-47, Beijing, China

p62: Zhang Dali sculptures at Contemporary Chinese Art Gallery