

WRITING ON THE WALL

CHINESE NEW REALISM AND AVANT-GARDE IN THE EIGHTIES AND NINETIES

GRONINGER MUSEUM - NAI PUBLISHERS

ZHANG DALI

Born 1963 in Harbin, Heilongjiang Province, China
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Lives and works in Beijing

During his six-year stay in Italy from 1989 to 1995, Zhang Dali, in his pursuit to express himself in a foreign environment, started to use the art of graffiti. The outline of his own bold head sprayed on a wall quickly became his trademark as it appeared on many corners of the Chinese capital after the artist's return to his home country. Soon Zhang developed his ideas further in his *Demolition* series, where he chiselled his head's silhouette out of derelict housing. Against the specific background of China, it was the artist's way of commenting on the demolition of the old Beijing. It was a remarkable achievement that was brazenly experimental in terms of art, bearing in mind the danger involved in putting his ideas into effect, which was only possible at night. It turned Zhang into a kind of guerrilla artist at the time.

Zhang's always intense concern for a dialogue with his fellow citizens and the creation of awareness of their environment are also evident in his paintings of portraits of migrant workers, in which he constructed their faces out of a repetition of the word AK-47, the name of the assault rifle used by

the Soviet Army, and in Zhang's artistic terms a symbol for aggression and violence in our everyday life.

Suicide, one of Zhang's first experiments with sculptural work, is a self-portrait in bronze showing the artist with a gun pointed at his head. The very expressive body language reminds us that this piece is actually linked to an earlier performance photo of the artist dealing with the process of violence. Is the only way out of the violent circles of society self-imposed violence?

Zhang Dali then moved on to cast 100 heads on behalf of the countless builders of modern China, forgotten members of society, thus documenting their existence. In the sculptural installation series *Chinese Offspring* Zhang further expands his ideas, casting the whole body of migrant workers. The display of these real-life sculptures, in up-side-down position hanging from the ceiling, draws the attention to their state of being victims of the ongoing socioeconomic changes: they are floating, helplessly and without a foot to stand on.

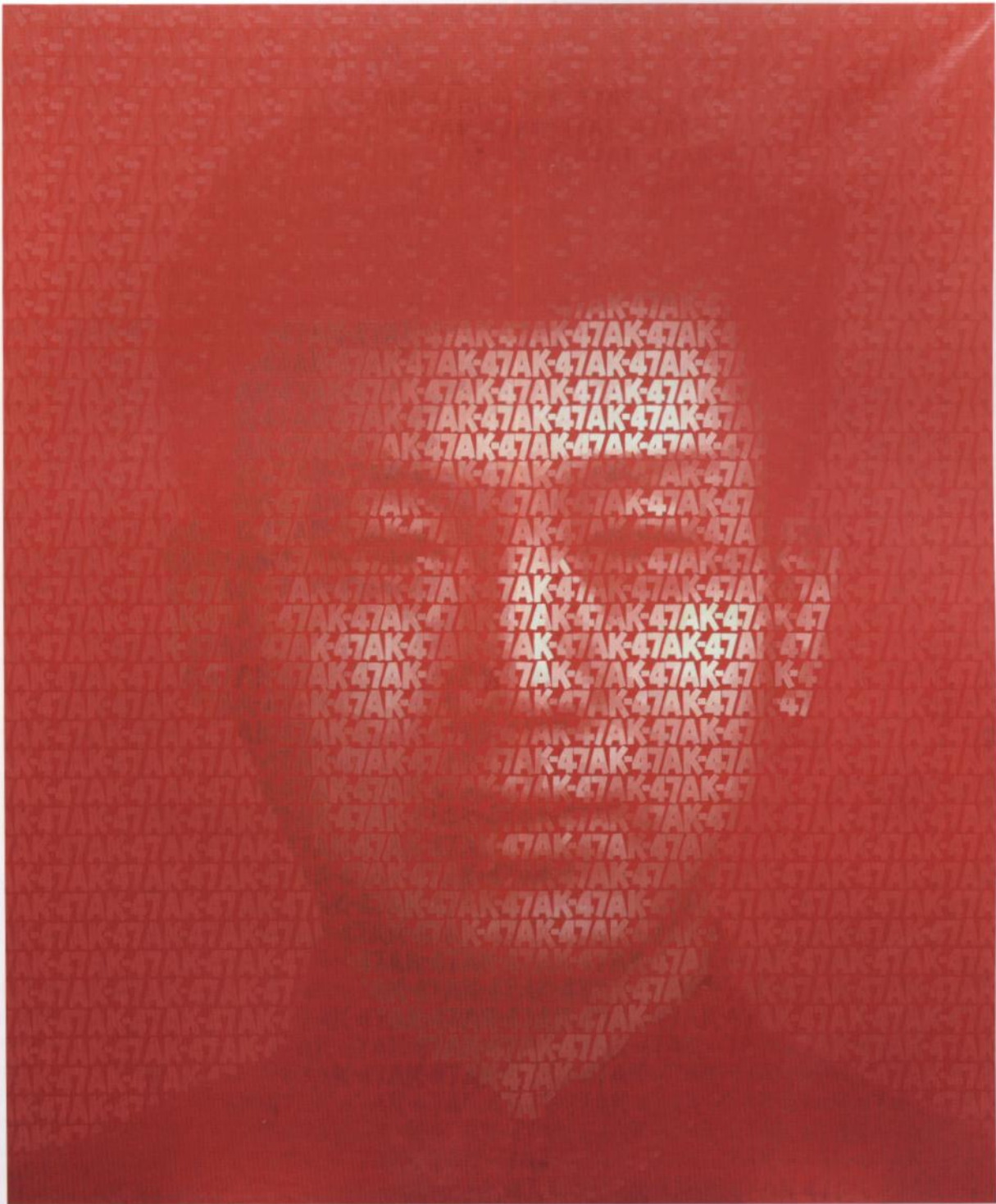


Zhang Dali, *Suicide*, 1999
bronze, 72 x 65 x 26 cm, collection of the artist



Zhang Dali, AK-47, 2001

oil on canvas, 180 x 150 cm, collection Chinese Contemporary, London/Beijing



Zhang Dali, AK-47, 2001

oil on canvas, 180 x 150 cm, collection Chinese Contemporary, London/Beijing