

ART VOICES

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NEW ORLEANS

MIAMI

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AUREL SCHMIDT

ZHANG DALI

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CIVILIAN ART PROJECTS

ZHANG DALI OPENS "SLOGANS" AT KIANG GALLERY

DISSIDENCE

EXPORTING

BY ALEX PODESTA

In September, Kiang Gallery in Atlanta, Georgia, will open "Slogans," an exhibition of recent works by internationally renowned artist, Zhang Dali. The show runs from September 19th through October 25th.

Dali, a native of Harbin, Heilongjiang, China, studied at Beijing's prestigious Central Academy of Art and Design and then relocated to Italy for six years. He first garnered international attention for his "Dialogues" series, which began to take its mature form upon his return to Beijing in the mid-nineties. By 1998, this series had become central in a public controversy regarding the emergence of graffiti art in Beijing, catapulting Dali to global recognition.

The ongoing work, "Dialogues," involves spray painted, graffiti images of a stylized version of Dali's head, usually accompanied by his "AK-47" tag, and often placed on condemned buildings in the inner city. In many cases he then returns to the sites and chisels out the space limned by the spray can, creating a new work of the negative/positive, spatial interplay of light and mass on sites destined for destruction.

These pieces highlight the buildings on which they are created, underscoring their destruction for the sake of the rapid and progressive rebuilding that the metropolitan center of Beijing is currently undergoing. By extension, these buildings become metaphors for the people who are both displaced and heavily affected by the change. Hyper-progress, and the resulting fallout, is central to all of Dali's work.

Another of Dali's series is called "Chinese Offspring". For this work Dali has cast life-sized immigrant workers in resin, tattooed them with his "AK-47" tag, inverted, and suspended them from the ceiling, usually in groups of about fifteen. Each of these figures is marked with a specific number but appear relatively homogeneous. The workers are trapped, incapacitated and commodified. The figures stand in for the millions of immigrants continuing to flood into China's metropolitan centers looking for prosperity but

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often finding squalor and degradation.

Continuing to focus on the sociopolitical inequality suffered by many of the immigrants to China's major cities, Dali began working on the "AK-47" series in which he makes paintings of workers meshed with a repeated grid of the tag that had adorned the "Dialogues" series. The tag is presented as a negative screen on top of the portraits. Aesthetically this has strong ties to the physical piercing of walls in the "Dialogues" series. Dali has said that he sees the tag as representing both a sort of generalized violence and the violence perpetrated by shortsighted governmental policy on a society.

Zhang Dali's show at Kiang Gallery is a continuation of the "AK-47" portrait paintings. In six new acrylic on vinyl paintings, the "AK-47" is replaced by a variety of Chinese characters. These characters are slogans that the government has historically put up around the city to "help" the populace—axiomatic guidelines for better living. They offer advice such as, "Enhance an advanced culture. Promote social development." and "Study ceremony and propriety and you will make yourself more cultivated. Behave according to ceremony and propriety and you will make life more beautiful." The people shown in these paintings are taken from old identification cards that Dali finds at flea markets.

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I was able to catch up with Zhang Dali and ask him some questions about this show and his work to date.

Alex Podesta: The exhibition, "Slogans," is described in the gallery's press release as a continuation of the "AK-47" series. What is the significance of the shift from the tag to the "slogan" characters?

Zhang Dali: Yes, there is a shift. But the change in language and in form in the new work is not so big. I think there is continuity in the artistic form. I did, however, want to make my work more directly understandable to the Chinese. Before this work I mainly criticized the big trends in the social and economic system, but with this new work I started to pay more attention to specific people and events.

The slogans are very close to the real life of each person. The distance between a person living in this city and the actual tools used by the government is narrow. The message enters into the life of each person. It is a message giving orders. It has the aim of imposing a certain way of life or a certain behavior. The people are treated like young pupils who have started to learn the alphabet and to write. The slogans tell the people what to write and what to think.

I call on the people to think with their own brains - not just to listen to what they are told to do. I think it is the

responsibility, the task of the artist to pay attention to the details or the big trends or the big movements in society.

All of my series have been carried on for a long time. Each of them is a long-term project. I maintain a particular focus for a long time and only drop it if it seems to lose meaning. Sometimes this is because the times have changed—the problems we are faced with change. Sometimes the message is exhausted. As long as the message remains germane, though, I continue.

AP: In preparation for the Olympics, Beijing seems to have escalated the kind of progressive rebuilding that is highlighted by your "Dialogues" series. What are your thoughts on this and do you have any specific work planned to coincide with the games?

ZD: I'm not at all interested in the Olympics. This is only an opportunity the government has given to itself for auto-celebration. We common people just go on with our common lives. In fact, the Olympic games have brought to our normal lives many troubles and inconveniences. Many jobs have been stopped. People who want to enter Beijing are controlled very strictly.

The Olympics should be an occasion for the people to have a good time and to celebrate but they have been transformed into a tool for the government's official propaganda: "One word, one dream." Can we still have different dreams? Do we dare to have a different dream? There is no more dream! I have prepared a new work that reflects the real life of common people and is to be exhibited for two months at the 798 Art District during the Olympiad.

AP: You once suggested that as an artist you raise questions but don't solve them. This is an interesting thought. Could you elaborate on that?

ZD: Yes. Artists pursue the spirit, and at the same time, have a clear understanding or vision, of the real problems. The artist's life is in a specific political system—the system of his time, of his country. In order to solve the political problems, political means are required. This is why I say that the artist has the responsibility of raising the question, of showing the problem, but can't solve the problem. These problems should be solved by politicians, by social activists, or by other organizations and individuals, who dedicate their life and energy to finding solutions for a better society and a better political system.

Unless the artist wants to give up his art and become a politician, organizer of a social/political movement, or a government administrator, then this is their role. But I think the artist has, in this world, his own professional ontology. He has a social responsibility to raise questions. This is also the responsibility of intellectuals at any level—academics or free lancers. The weapon of intellectuals (and of artists as a special kind of intellectuals) is the spirit and mind. The results of their work can't be seen immediately, but only in a historical perspective. Their influence can be huge. They are the initiators of new trends. They are the big brain in history. A society without fine intellectuals is a handicapped society. We eat to live and we should not live for eating.

AP: Thank you for the interview, Zhang. Best of luck with your Atlanta and Beijing openings.

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