

Wu Hung on

**CONTEMPORARY
CHINESE ARTISTS**

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A public controversy surfaced in Beijing's newspapers in early 1998. At its center was an image that had become familiar to the city's many urban residents: a spray-painted profile of a large bald head, sometimes two meters tall. The graffiti head seemed to have been duplicating itself, and its appearances gradually spread from the inner city to beyond the Third Ring Road. Alone or in groups, the head was found within the confines of small neighborhoods and along major avenues. Who was the man behind these images? What did he want to say or do? Should he be punished when identified? What kind of penalty should he receive? Was the image a sort of public art and therefore legitimate? What is public art anyway? To a city of 10 million that had not been exposed to the graffiti art of the West, these questions were new. None of them had straightforward answers.

Neither did Zhang Dali who created these images. Shortly after the debate started, he came forward as the anonymous painter; by March 1998, he began to give interviews to reporters and art critics. It turned out that, far from a "punk" or "gang member" as some local people had guessed, he was a professional artist trained in Beijing's prestigious Central Academy of Art and Design. Moreover, he was not a typical Chinese professional artist because he had immigrated to Italy in 1989 and first forged the image of the bald head in Bologna, where he had lived for six years. He continued to paint the same head after returning to China in 1995, and by 1998 he had sprayed more than 2,000 such images throughout Beijing. It also turned out that he had developed a theory to rationalize his seem-

ingly mindless act. In published interviews, Zhang explained that the image was a self-portrait through which he hoped to engage the city in a “dialogue” with himself: “This image is a condensation of my own likeness as an individual. It stands in my place to communicate with this city. I want to know everything about this city—its state of being, its transformation, its structure. I call this project Dialogue. Of course there are many ways for an artist to communicate with a city. I use this method because, for one thing, it allows me to place my work at every corner of this city in a short period.”¹

Instructive as it is, there is a disturbing deviation between the artist’s sure voice and the uncertainty involved in the images themselves. Looking through hundreds of Zhang’s photographs of his graffiti portraits from different places and circumstances, one gains less knowledge of Beijing than of the artist’s contested relationship with the city. It is true that these photos show Beijing’s changing cityscape—vanishing old lanes, dilapidated demolition sites, scaffold-embraced high-rises, and protected traditional monuments. But as the title of Zhang’s project indicates, what these photographs mean to record is not a city as an object of sociological observation or aesthetic appreciation, but a “dialogue” initiated by an artist’s subjective intervention, which in this case is his self-image forced on the community at large. In fact, the question these photographs evoke is not so much about the content or purpose of dialogue, but whether the artist’s desire to communicate with the city can actually be realized—whether the city is willing or ready to be engaged in a forced interaction. Thus, while each photograph is invariably animated by a yearning for dialogue, the response by Beijing’s residents ranges from indifference to suspicion, fear, misunderstanding, and rejection. Searching for a solution, the artist is forced to change the meaning of his project, to the point that he has to retreat, however unconsciously, to the position of an observer or accomplice, letting the city speak to itself.

What interests me most about Zhang’s project, therefore, is not its theoretical consistency or its impressive scale and durability, but the paradox between the premeditated insistence of a signifier and the unpremeditated permutation of signification: although each of the graffiti portraits is a deliberate repetition, its meaning and effect as the locus of an intended dialogue with the city is generally beyond the artist’s control. Only because of such impossibility to precondition a dialogue, and to predict its result, can the dialogue itself—successful or not—gain a genuine sense of spatiality and temporality. Guided by this interest, my purpose in compiling this photo essay is not to provide an illustrated explication of the stated agendas of the artist (which have been detailed in several interviews and reports, combined with the writers’ own social critiques or art analyses) or to interpret Zhang’s project as a remote echo of the “international graffiti art” that had been enshrined in Western museums by the early 1980s. Rather, the seven images reproduced here, selected from some four hundred photographs made available to me by Zhang, document an intense negotiation between a public minded artist and a rapidly changing city over a period of five years, from 1995 to 1999. Since such negotiation has also become a central issue in contemporary Chinese art, this photo essay addresses a broad phenomenon through a specific case.

PICTURE 1: BEGINNING FROM BOLOGNA

Zhang was one of a considerable number of Chinese artists who left China after the student demonstrations in 1989 ended in bloodshed. This sudden dislocation and the difficulty of fitting into alien cultures exasperated the trauma of Tiananmen Square, with the result that emigration was experienced as self-exile. In an interview with me in September 1999, Zhang described his first job in Italy of making exotic “oriental paintings” for a commercial gallery as nothing but a base means for survival. He finally gave it up, but then he found himself surrounded by a cultural void and deeply depressed. A turning point was his discovery of graffiti—not in museums but in Bologna’s back alleys.

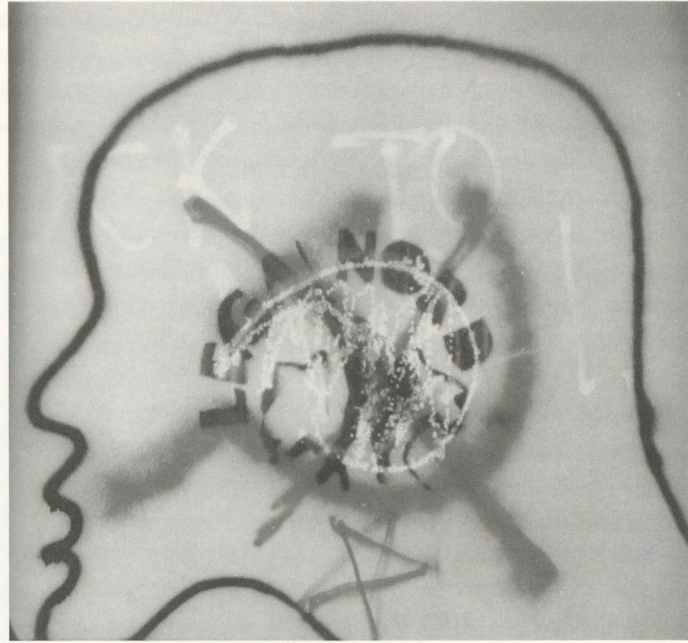


FIG. 1: ZHANG DALI, *Dialogue · Bologna*,
GRAFFITI, BOLOGNA, ITALY, 1994.

Suddenly, there was a possibility for him to divorce the past and join the present. He began to spray his self-image of a bald head on the walls of Bologna, and it was immediately responded to by other graffiti (fig. 1). The sense of spontaneous communication was uplifting, and he titled his graffiti *Dialogue*. But was there a real dialogue? In a way, he was reliving the prehistory of graffiti—before it was admitted into the art history canon—and his origin in another time/place enabled him to make this fantastic return. His graffiti were a veiled fantasy also because he still considered himself an artist, even though he had abandoned his academic training and the painting studio. Therefore, his self-image on the street both exhibited his new self and masked his old self, and his “dialogue” with other street painters was equally about communication and miscommunication. This photo records when one of his two graffiti heads was superimposed overnight by other graffiti: first a Communist hammer and sickle sign and then the insignia of a right-wing party. Later he learned that this “graffiti war” was triggered by a mistake: his “skin-head” was taken as a neo-Nazi symbol. Thus while he continued to be excited by making images in public, the interactions they provoked were rarely substantiated by real exchanges of lived experiences. Graffiti had created an illusion of a shared language and culture, but, in fact, they concealed linguistic and cultural differences. Most tellingly, when Zhang traveled to Slovenia in 1993 and made street graffiti to express his antiwar sentiment, on walls already adorned with signs and signatures incomprehensible to him, he sprayed a slogan in Chinese that was likewise incomprehensible to the local graffiti artists.

PICTURE 2: REENTERING

Zhang is also one of a considerable number of Chinese artists who have ended their self-exile and returned to China during recent years. The reasons for their homecoming are complex, and each case varies, but, in many instances, an enormous attraction was to liberate oneself from the ambiguous status of being an “overseas Chinese”; there would be no more need to go through a painful and often unrewarding cultural conversion. These artists can be both “avant-garde” and “Chinese” only in China.

Besides, as the 1989 tragedy had gradually subsided into people's subconscious, Deng Xiaoping's new economic policy began to transform China from a socialist monolith into a huge contradiction that was full of opportunities. In the 1990s, Beijing was an oversized construction site embellished with a cacophony of commercial ads. Dust, mud, and torn papers were everywhere, and gleaming high-rises soared above the remnants of demolished houses. Foreign investors, domestic businessmen, and 3.5 million illegal immigrants from the countryside poured into this city, and the bewildering transformations promised hope to visionaries and gold diggers.

Zhang contributed to this chaos with his sprayed profiles. Following his Italian experience, he started with Beijing's "underground" and first painted in shadowy alleyways and under freeway bridges. He continued to call these images Dialogue and looked for interaction; but the graffiti met only with silence. In an interview, I asked him whether the 2,000 heads he had been spraying in Beijing since 1995 had ever provoked any responding graffiti. His answer came quick and firm: "No."

This photograph shows a traditional Beijing house's outer wall, which had been used as a local billboard before Zhang sprayed his graffiti head on it (fig. 2). To the left of the head is the character for "vehicle" inside a used tire—the sign of a bicycle repair stand. To the right is a printed sheet promising instant cure for all sorts of venereal diseases. The shop sign and the advertisement lie side by side with Zhang's head but have nothing to do with it. In fact, even though the head seems to thrust forward in an aggressive manner, it does not generate any interaction or dialogue, neither with the words/images next to it nor with the man napping underneath it. A more appropriate title for the photograph may be "No Dialogue." Back in Beijing, Zhang could now speak in his native tongue, but the Beijingers had to learn the language of graffiti art.



FIG. 2: ZHANG DALI, *Dialogue · Gongti Beilu*, GRAFFITI, PHOTOGRAPH, 1998.

PICTURE 3: THE INVISIBLE ARTIST

Without concrete images responding to his graffiti, Zhang turned his attention beyond the images to capture people's reactions: it was perhaps in their eyes, on their faces, or from their casual remarks that he could find their responses to his work. He began to hang around the places where he had sprayed the graffiti head, secretly watching the passersby and catching their every word. He had become an invisible man-made double—an anonymous painter combined with a voyeur/eavesdropper. To avoid being caught, he only painted in a guerrilla fashion, roaming on his bicycle through Beijing's deep night, finishing a head here and there in a few seconds when no one was around. His sustained anonymity during the day allowed him to complete the significance of his graffiti as Dialogue. Later

he told the art critic Leng Lin that by talking about a sprayed head on a wall as if it had been done by someone else he could detect unguarded “the cultural background and state of mind” of his conversation partner. A taxi driver told him that the head was a Mafia symbol like those in Hong Kong kung fu movies. A neighbor worried that the head was an official mark for houses slated to be demolished and whose current occupants would soon be kicked out. As Zhang said to Leng, “I have been collecting such reactions—reactions that turn my work from a monologue into a dialogue.”²

A dialogue it may have been. But it was only a one-sided dialogue, as it merely consisted of a reaction, not an interaction. From 1995 to 1997, Zhang’s interest lay in what people thought and said about his work, but not in developing an ongoing conversation with an audience. We can thus understand why the graffiti artist soon took up the camera after he returned to China: photography helped him capture people’s instantaneous reactions and make such reactions eternal. This photograph, one of the earliest such snapshots Zhang took in Beijing, never fails to chill me with a feeling of an inability to communicate (fig. 3). On a bare wall of a back alley there is again the lonely graffiti head. Still leaning forward, it seems to be following two local boys to appeal for their attention. Ignoring the head, one of the boys turns around to stare into the camera lens with a cool, dispassionate gaze. The artist’s second self beyond the picture frame is acknowledged but not sympathized with.

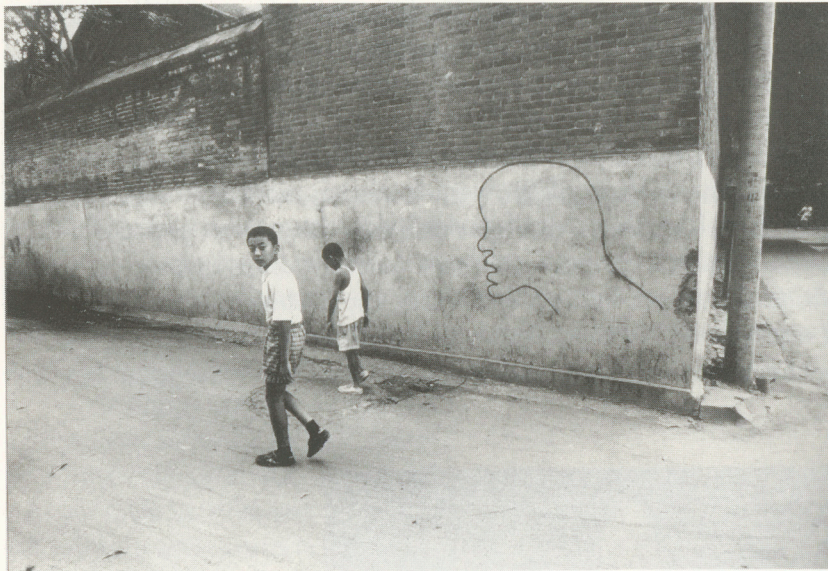


FIG. 3: ZHANG DALI, *Dialogue*
· *Longxing Hutong*, GRAFFITI,
PHOTOGRAPH, 1995.

PICTURE 4: DIALOGUE THROUGH MEDIA

A full year after Zhang sprayed his first graffiti head in Beijing, a printed response finally appeared in a popular magazine. This 1996 article starts with a vivid but bitter account of the two authors’ reactions (or what they believed to be people’s common reactions) to Zhang’s images: “On Beijing’s streets you can inadvertently come across a bizarre image, or a row of them. More than a meter tall, it is a huge face in profile outlined in black spray paint. Encountering it for the first time you wouldn’t take it seriously, or you’d think it was only a naughty kid’s scribble. But this is far from the truth, because

when you go out again the same day or a few days later, the same monstrosity boldly greets you in another location, and you repeat this disturbing experience over and over. This ghostlike face seems omnipresent and to be chasing you around, and you feel powerless to avoid it.”³

With such intuitive negativity and a subsequent “analysis” to justify it, this article introduced a group of reports with a shared attitude and tactic. Zhang’s images were characterized as philistine imitations of Western “graffiti art” that, in turn, epitomized the “decadent aesthetics” of the West. Another common strategy of these writings was to cite “public opinion” that ridiculed the “ugly, monstrous head.” Still, these writings are interesting for subtly distancing themselves from the official position. Speaking for “a general public,” their authors rarely, if at all, evoked the government’s authority to condemn the graffiti, and they quoted from people of divergent professions, backgrounds, and age groups to give their reports a sense of authenticity. The ten interviewees cited in the article, for example, included (in the original order) a middle-aged university professor, a local restaurateur, a passerby, a farmer-turned-construction worker, a college freshman, an American art student, an architect, an “old Beijing guy,” a member of the local residential committee, and a policeman “who happened to be at the spot.” The harshest opinion, coming predictably from the policeman and the committee member, demanded that “the troublemaker be found and arrested at once.” The others voiced uncertainties and hesitations, but none supported the graffiti. The two authors could thus reach this conclusion: “We can say therefore that the public’s basic attitude toward such graffiti in the capital is: incomprehension, repugnance, and rejection.” Since no alternative views were offered in the media, this conclusion became the unchallenged public opinion in 1996 and 1997. But since this opinion was not yet an official verdict, Zhang continued his project, and his images continued to receive responses from a constructed “public” in the media.

The tide was changing, however. In early 1998, several of Beijing’s “cultural” newspapers and magazines featured a debate centered on Zhang’s graffiti.⁴ An increasing number of authors took a sympathetic stand. But what was more important, through this debate Zhang’s art provided a focus for discussions about larger issues—cultural diversity and social mobility, urban violence and racial tolerance, public art and performance, artistic freedom and artists’ responsibilities, city planning and environmental policies—that were gradually entering the media as Beijing was becoming a global metropolis. Finally, the artist abandoned his anonymity and joined this discussion: Zhang gave his first



FIG. 4: PEOPLE READING REPORTS OF ZHANG DALI'S GRAFFITI ON BEIJING'S STREETS

interview in March 1998 to directly address his audience through the newspaper. This form of communication between experimental artists and the public inspired Leng Lin to stage a special “exhibition.” As shown in this photograph, Leng printed Zhang’s graffiti (and works of three other experimental artists) in a newspaper format and distributed the material throughout the city (fig. 4). The purpose was, in his words, “to use the popular media of the newspaper as a form of artistic expression and exchange, a form that brings art and society into close contact at any time and in any place.”⁵

PICTURE 5: PICTURING DIALOGUE I—DESTRUCTION/CONSTRUCTION

Although Zhang eventually did get reactions to his art on the street and through the media, these were verbal responses, not visual communication. His insistence on displaying thousands of his graffiti heads in public over several years was extraordinary; in the end, however, he still failed to engage other images into a spontaneous visual dialogue. Partly because of the city’s irresponsiveness on this level of interaction, Zhang the artist (not Zhang the social critic) had to explore other possibilities to realize the theme of his project—dialogue. The result was a subtle but crucial change in the meaning of this theme: he was increasingly preoccupied with an ongoing “visual dialogue” internal to the city (rather than expecting an interaction with the city that could never materialize). In addition, photography gradually took over to become his means to represent such visual dialogue, often dramatic confrontations of architectural images with his sprayed self-images.

A major visual drama in Beijing during the 1990s was never-ending destruction and construction. Although large-scale demolition is a regular feature of any metropolis, the enormity and duration of the demolition in Beijing was unusual. Following China’s “economic miracle,” investment poured into the country from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the West. Thousands of old houses were destroyed to make room for glimmering hotels, shopping malls, and business centers. Everywhere were cranes and scaffolding, the roaring sound of bulldozers, broken walls, and mountainlike waste. To some residents, demolition meant forced relocation; to others, it promised a larger apartment, albeit in a remote suburban area. In theory, demolition and relocation were conditions for the capital’s modernization. In actuality, these conditions brought about a growing alienation between the city and its residents: they no longer belonged to one another.

A major subject of Chinese experimental art in the 1990s,⁶ demolition and relocation also dominated Zhang’s work in 1998 and 1999. He differed from other artists in two major ways, however. First, he was the only graffiti artist in Beijing who filled in half-destroyed, empty houses with his sprayed images, thus “reclaiming” an abandoned site, however temporarily. Second, he always contrasted destruction with construction, thus forming a visual dialogue between the two. Both features are forcefully demonstrated in this 1998 photograph (fig. 5). In the foreground of the picture, still standing amid scattered garbage, are broken



FIG. 5: ZHANG DALI, *Dialogue · Beijing*, 1998.

walls, remnants of a demolished traditional house on which Zhang has sprayed a row of his by now famous heads. Two huge modern buildings rise behind this wasteland. Still surrounded by scaffolding, one of them already advertises itself as the future “Prime Tower” and offers the telephone number of its sales department. This and many other photographs made by Zhang during this period serve a double purpose. On the one hand, they record site-specific environmental art projects that have been carried out by the artist. On the other hand, these projects were designed largely to be photographed, resulting in two-dimensional images as independent works of art. Consequently, the role of Zhang’s graffiti head has also changed: no longer a stimulus for an expected interaction on the street, it now serves as a pictorial sign that points to and heightens an urban visual drama.

PICTURE 6: PICTURING DIALOGUE II—DEMOLITION/PRESERVATION

A second kind of architectural dialogue in Zhang’s photographs takes place between demolished old houses and preserved ancient monuments; their sharply contrasting images allude to two radically different attitudes toward tradition. In this photograph, for example, the picture plane is filled almost entirely with the remaining wall of a destroyed house, on which Zhang has sprayed the bald head and hollowed it out with a hammer and chisel. The rough opening on the wall is analogous to a fresh wound, through which one sees in the distance a glorious, miragelike image: the golden roof of one of the four corner pavilions of the Forbidden City.

In a succinct but quite literal way, this picture relates a twofold process of destruction and preservation that Beijing has been enduring throughout the modern period, especially over the past decade (fig. 6). Built during the Ming (1368-1644) and the Qing (1644-1911) dynasties, traditional Beijing consisted of a number of nested subcities—the Outer City, the Inner City, the Imperial City, and the Forbidden City. A series of magnificent tower gates punctuated the north-south axis to link these broken spaces into a rhythmic continuum. Until the early twentieth century, Beijing was, in the eyes of the noted architectural historian Liang Sicheng, incomparable for its supreme architectural precision and harmony.⁷

Now this city has been thoroughly destroyed, and its destruction can be simply summarized by reference to three historical moments. The Imperial City first vanished in the first half of the twentieth century when major modern avenues were constructed running east-west, burying the old north-south Imperial Way underneath. The walls of the Inner and Outer Cities were then destroyed in the 1950s and 1960s through a Herculean effort mobilized by the state; also gone were most of the tower gates and all the archways and brick landmarks across the city’s traditional streets. Finally, the recent construction fervor ruined a large number of traditional courtyard houses. One of Beijing’s major architectural projects from 1997 to 1999, for example, was to open up a thirty-meter-wide avenue across the most densely populated section of downtown Beijing.

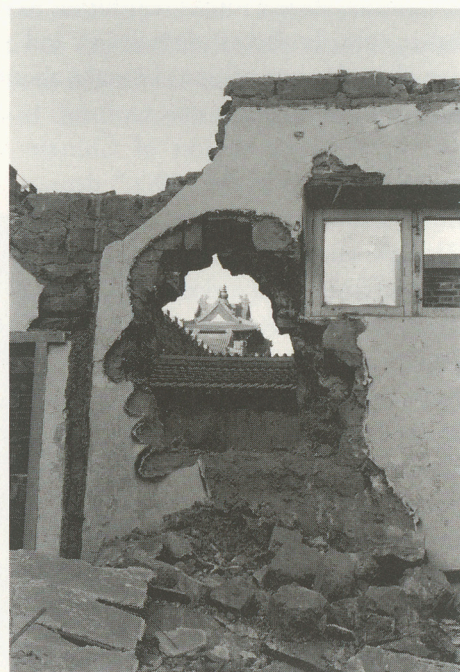


FIG. 6: ZHANG DALI, *Dialogue · Forbidden City*, 1998

No published statistics inform us how many households were relocated. They just disappeared; their streets and lanes vanished from the city's map.

From this giant obliteration emerged modern Beijing, while traditional Beijing is being "preserved" as a prized collection of architectural fragments: a few old gardens, houses, temples, theaters, and mainly the isolated rectangle of the Forbidden City. These fragments are praised as masterpieces of Chinese architecture and are protected by law; the attention they receive contrasts alarmingly to the brutality that has been imposed on "other" traditional structures. Such brutality was most acutely felt during the recent demolition campaign when numerous private houses had been reduced to rubble. As Zhang's photograph shows, a house could be turned inside out without hesitation; any attempt at intimacy is silenced by an organized violence of forced demolition and relocation.

Zhang's decision to gouge out his graffiti image—to tear the wall open for a second time—can thus be understood as a response to this organized violence. The method was to amplify this violence through an art project. As he said in an interview: "Many things are happening in this city: demolition, construction, car accidents, sex, drunkenness, and violence infiltrates every hole. . . . I choose these walls. They are the screen onto which the show of the city is projected. . . . Only one and a half hours. The sound of hammer and chisels. Bricks fall, stirring up clouds of dust."⁸ Such simulated violence is given a visual expression in this photograph: a broken wall frames one of the nation's most admired architectural jewels.

PICTURE 7: PICTURING DIALOGUE III—CENTER/BORDER

The images in this photograph resemble those in the last one: a dilapidated wall bearing Zhang's graffiti is again juxtaposed with a palace-style building in the background. But to every Chinese artist, the message delivered here is specific and transparent because the building in the distance, rather than an ancient structure, is immediately recognizable as the National Art Gallery, the headquarters of official art in China. It is the place where every state-sponsored National Art Exhibition is held, and it also houses the all-powerful Association of Chinese Artists, through whose vast network the government controls the art world. The building defines the center in the official map of Chinese art. For the same reason, it is also a heavily contested space; its authority has been challenged by a growing unofficial art during the past twenty years.

The two most important events in the short history of this unofficial art took place at the National Art Gallery. The first, the Star exhibition in 1979, marked the emergence of this unofficial art after the Cultural Revolution. Members of the group staged their show on the street outside the National Art Gallery, but as soon as a large crowd gathered, the police interfered and canceled the exhibition. The second event, the much larger China/Avant-garde exhibition, took place exactly ten years later. This time, unofficial artists occupied the National Art Gallery and turned it into a solemn site that resembled a tomb: long black carpets, extending from the street to the exhibition hall, bore the emblem of the show—a "No U-turn" traffic sign signaling "There is no turning back." The show itself was a rebellion against the established order in Chinese art. Three months later, many organizers and artists in this exhibition participated in the prodemocracy demonstrations in Tiananmen Square, which ended in the bloody massacre on June 4, 1989.

This history explains Zhang's 1999 photograph (fig. 7): the struggle continues, as here is another artist who takes a position "outside" the National Art Gallery's "center." But what is this outside position in Zhang's case? In retrospect, we realize that he has always identified himself with an outlying region circling a conventional center of gravity, be it a commercial high-rise, a protected ancient monument, or an official institution. It is clear that this self-positioning defines a space around which



FIG. 7: ZHANG DALI, *Dialogue* · National Art Gallery, GRAFFITI, PHOTOGRAPH, 1999.

he has formed his self-identity as an individual artist opposed to any kind of hegemony. By inscribing his self-image on ruined walls, however, he also problematizes his position and identity because this image is meant to be destroyed with the walls, not to be expanded into a new territory. Zhang said to me: “Walking alone inside a destroyed house I hear tiles breaking under my feet. The sound seems to come from inside of me. I am part of this vanishing scene.” There is no desire to cross this wasteland; instead, he prefers to view himself from a future-past perspective as a memory in the making: “With the development of Beijing, my graffiti images will eventually disappear on their own. But they will leave a trace of memory—a dialogue between an artist and this city.”⁹

CODA: COSMOPOLITANISM OF GRAFFITI ART

Graffiti are universal: there is no culture in the ancient or modern world that has failed to invent its own local custom of writing on rocks, trees, or walls. Today what we call “graffiti art” is not universal but global: it is an artistic, cultural, political, and economic practice extending beyond the local. Many articles and books have been written to trace the spread of this art from the far-flung boroughs of New York to Europe, Australia, and Asia. Looking back, the Manhattan graffiti artist Phase 2 (M. L. Marrow) was proud of the vast network his art had helped forge: “This thing has reached all the way around the world from Harlem to Japan. When has something else had an impact like that on every ethnic group in the entire world? ... You don’t even have to be able to talk English. All you gotta do is get a spray can and paint something.”¹⁰

Here Phase 2 was speaking about the networking of international graffiti artists, an early 1980s phenomenon that was coupled with the explosion of films, videos, and books, all of which promoted rap music, break dancing, and spray can writing around the world. This grassroots movement was intertwined with another kind of globalization of graffiti art, which had less to do with the geographical spread of this art than with its changing materiality and social status. Graffiti images were transcribed from walls to canvases and dislocated from dilapidated inner-city neighborhoods into glittering galleries and museums. Graffiti-inspired works, now featured in major art exhibitions and lavish catalogues, were appreciated as a distinct art style—a style that alluded to the surface images of graffiti but negated their original bearers, contexts, and messages. For this reason, these works have never been able to replace their lowly prototypes (which have continued to be associated with local communities and out-

laws), and they have continued to travel from one neighborhood to another across urban and national boundaries.

With this two-tier globalization at work, graffiti art presents us with a unique case to reflect on the cosmopolitanism of a contemporary metropolis. It becomes clear that such cosmopolitanism—exemplified here by the coexistence and interaction of various graffiti cultures in a shared urban space—is far from a harmonious state of being produced by a desire for all-inclusiveness. Rather, it is fundamentally a reality forced on the city; it encompasses contesting spaces, intentions, and attitudes that the city cannot escape. Graffiti art exists both in the museum and on the street; to decide which part of it is “inside” or “outside” means precisely to come to terms with one’s own positioning in relation to a city at large. Do we hang a poster of Keith Haring’s pop figures in the living room while demanding a stop to graffiti vandalism? Do we share graffitiist Bando’s feeling when he says, “Graffiti is ... a very beautiful crime”?¹¹ Do we support Philadelphia’s Anti-Graffiti Network or similar projects to confine street graffiti to designated areas? Can we define graffiti as an art by separating “good” graffiti from “bad”? Clear-cut answers to these questions tend to be self-serving and depart from the ideal of cosmopolitanism; but the situation that forces these questions upon us is cosmopolitan.

With Zhang’s homecoming in 1995, this international graffiti art finally reached Beijing fifteen years after its formation. A major reason for its belated arrival, of course, is that only at this moment did China’s capital begin to surface as a cosmopolitan city that could tolerate, however unwillingly, this art form. Zhang’s graffiti signal Beijing’s emerging cosmopolitanism not simply through their existence but by renewing the internal conflicts of graffiti art in a particular setting. In fact, as the city’s only known graffiti artist, Zhang internalizes these conflicts in himself. His street graffiti were motivated by a genuine desire to bypass the established art system and to develop a dialogue with the city. But now his photographs of his graffiti are sold in a foreign-owned commercial gallery in Beijing; one of these pictures even appeared on the cover of *Newsweek*. The plot of this success story is not unfamiliar, but the logic is new: having failed to engage Beijing in a direct conversation, Zhang and his art have nevertheless come to symbolize a new image of this city.