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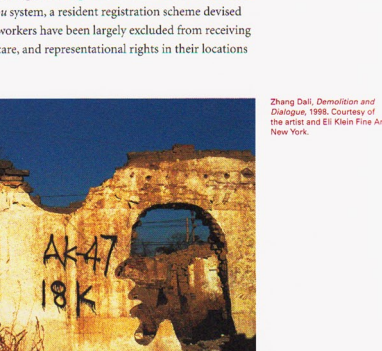
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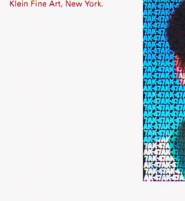
Stephanie Bailey New Slogan, Old Tricks: Zhang Dali in New York

Eli Klein Fine Art, New York
April 4–May 8, 2011

Zhang Dali, *Slogan 74*, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 150 × 120 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Eli Klein Fine Art, New York.

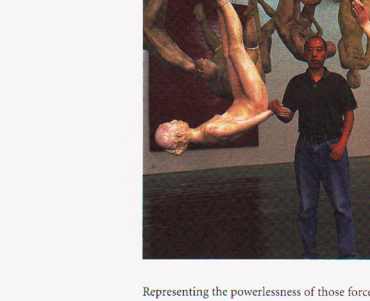


In Zhang Dali's latest exhibition, *New Slogan*, repeated patterns of Chinese characters painted in hues of blue, green, red, and orange form a series of phrases, including "Always obey the law and love life" and "Create the New City Civilization and protect the environment." These painted phrases create larger patterns that combine, in turn, to form highly stylized, uniformly sized formal portraits of Chinese men and women. Concentric circles screenprinted over the painted surfaces create a dizzying effect that evokes spinning, hypnotism, radars, targets, and magnetic fields. On other canvases, painted rays evoke Japan's military flag of the rising sun, the Tibetan flag of independence, the rising sun of Dr. Sun Yat Sen, and the red sun associated with the cult of Mao. On others, identical, stencilled flies are spray-painted onto the surface like military drones.



The paintings expand on the implied violence in the work that first gained Zhang Dali notoriety between 1995 and 1998 as China's only graffiti artist—for example, the heads painted in profile on condemned structures around Beijing, which the artist often later returned to, hollering them out with a sledgehammer, as documented in the *Dialogues and Demolitions* series. Alluding to the violence rendered by the demolition that occurs during urban development and the social disruptions that follow, Zhang Dali's graffiti tag, AK-47, is featured once more in *New Slogan*, but this time is explored in reference to the treatment of China's 225 million migrant workers, one fifth of the country's population,¹ who are considered by Zhang Dali as integral to the rapid development of China's urban areas. And yet, under the urban *hukou* system, a resident registration scheme devised in the Mao era,² migrant workers have been largely excluded from receiving residency permits, healthcare, and representational rights in their locations of employment.³

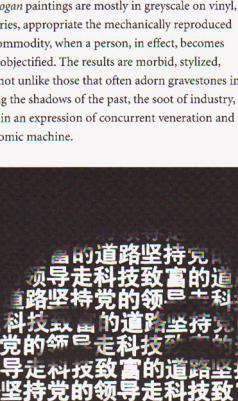
Zhang Dali, *Slogan 80*, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 150 × 120 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Eli Klein Fine Art, New York.



Zhang Dali, *Demolition and Dialogue*, 1998. Courtesy of the artist and Eli Klein Fine Art, New York.

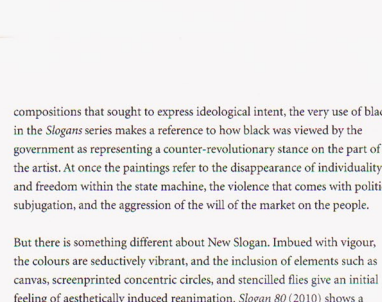
AK-47 (H9) (2008) is larger than the other works on show. Placed at the gallery's entrance, it is the only realistically coloured portrait in the exhibition, and features a young man's face emerging from repeated AK-47 tags painted in colours evocative of Socialist Realism on a black, vinyl surface. Recalling the portrait of Mao Zedong that is still hanging on the front gates of the Forbidden City and in many homes throughout China, the painting at once references a gun that continues to fuel conflict around the world, the violence that defines much of China's twentieth century history, as well as the violent potential of individuals defined by government slogans taken from the city walls of Beijing, featured in the rest of the works

Zhang Dali, *AK-47 (H9)*, 2008, acrylic on vinyl, 300 × 200 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Eli Klein Fine Art, New York.



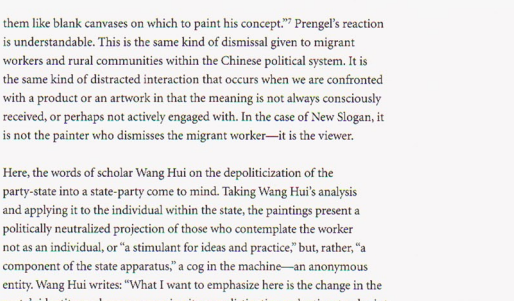
Zhang Dali with *Chinese Offspring*, 2004, cast resin, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Eli Klein Fine Art, New York.

In both *AK47 (H9)* and *Chinese Offspring*, the disenfranchised are monumentalized, either through the formal language of sculpture or the sheer size of the painted surface.



Representing the powerlessness of those forced to escape rural poverty by working either in China's offshoring manufacturing industry or in its construction boom, *Chinese Offspring* communicates the irony of the individual to sub-citizen, as even here the human figure might be objectified as a work of art. Evoking the spiritual, introspective bodily meditations of sculptor Antony Gormley, the figures in Zhang Dali's work, although imbued with meditative, aesthetic beauty, are marred by the reality behind the sculptures, which is as savage as it is real. In an unrated and uncensored film by the Liu Brothers that dramatizes the making of the sculptures, *iNaked*,⁴ the production process of casting a live, human body, and the difficult stories of those enticed to model, portrays lives without value and the struggle to retain dignity in the objectification of the human through the mechanism of labour and production.

Like branded cattle in the slaughterhouse, each *Chinese Offspring* figure is marked with the artist's signature, the work's title, and its edition number, suggesting the commodification of the human body. This idea of branding continues in the *Slogan* series, first shown in 2008, which combined government slogans with portraits. But this time, people have become brand in the language of propaganda. Contemplating a world in which ideology is imposed, the *Slogan* paintings are mostly in greyscale on vinyl, and, like the *New Slogan* series, appropriate the mechanically reproduced language of the image as commodity, when a person, in effect, becomes a symbol and is ultimately objectified. The results are morbid, stylized, black-and-white portraits not unlike those that often adorn gravestones in Chinese cemeteries, evoking the shadows of the past, the soot of industry, and the death of the living in an expression of concurrent veneration and mourning within the economic machine.



Zhang Dali, *Slogan 88*, 2008, acrylic on vinyl, 200 × 180 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Eli Klein Fine Art, New York.

On these paintings, Zhang Dali explained: "People's experiences and thoughts are formed by the world they live in, and the *Slogans* series draws attention to the influence external forces exert on society and the circumstances of people subjected to those forces."⁵ Within the tradition of Maoist propaganda, in which the leader was depicted in stylized

compositions that sought to express ideological intent, the very use of black in the *Slogans* series makes a reference to how black was viewed by the government as representing a counter-revolutionary stance on the part of the artist. At once the paintings refer to the disappearance of individuality and freedom within the state machine, the violence that comes with political subjugation, and the aggression of the will of the market on the people.

But there is something different about *New Slogan*. Imbued with vigour, the colours are seductively vibrant, and the inclusion of elements such as canvases, screenprinted concentric circles, and stencilled flies give an initial feeling of aesthetically induced reanimation. *Slogan 80* (2010) shows a young boy, whose image is rendered by the repeated phrase: "Strengthen the administration, carry out responsibility, eradicate contravention, put an end to accidents." The image is layered first with a greyscale photographic portrait, then with rays rendered in shades of green and red emanating just off centre from the boy's nose. Printed concentric circles start from the centre of the canvas and spread out to the edges of the painting with a secondary series of circles printed on top. In the painting, Zhang Dali visualizes the hypnotic power of such slogans on a new generation. There is a sense that the risk of receiving and accepting political propaganda in a state of ignorance and distraction as a result of information overload is greater than ever in twenty-first century globalized world connected by ever-expanding media technology.

Maybe that's why the paintings follow a uniform formula of street art styles paired with Pop art vibrancy and conservative fine art elements that feel intensely commercial. At the moment, in fact, it is hard not to notice the concentration of American Pop art show in galleries around Eli Klein's space in New York. Warhol, Lichtenstein, and others are out in full force, either as prints or serving as an inspiration for other artists—so much so that Pop is beginning to look tacky and obsolete in its repetition and murky market connotations. Interestingly, in art world circles, that is how many view contemporary Chinese art, Chinese artists themselves, and the mass production that has resulted in China's comparatively stable economy in this twenty-first century era of financial crisis. Yet, although there is no denying the importance of the market to contemporary Chinese art, there is a danger in distancing oneself within such market-driven discourse that avoids, which operate within a context that expands beyond national politics and into the politics of representation.

In this sense, the use of outdated American-infused Pop art within the contemporary Chinese context presented in a New York gallery highlights a contemporary conundrum. Just as government slogans and propaganda are received on a level of distraction, so might the messages of such realities in an artwork to its global audience. If that is the case, to what extent can an artwork incite real and timely political discussion? In the *CityArts.com* review of the show, Kate Prengel wrote: "The show's message is... an almost painfully simple [one]. There is little beauty in the execution to give it depth, and there is nothing personal in the work to give it poignancy. Zhang Dali never connects with his impoverished subjects. Instead, he treats

them like blank canvases on which to paint his concept."⁶ Prengel's reaction is understandable. This is the same kind of dismissal given to migrant workers and rural communities within the Chinese political system. It is the same kind of distracted interaction that occurs when we are confronted with a product or an artwork in that the meaning is not always consciously received, or perhaps not actively engaged with. In the case of *New Slogan*, it is not the painter who dismisses the migrant worker—it is the viewer.

Here, the words of scholar Wang Hui on the depoliticization of the party-state into a state-party come to mind. Taking Wang Hui's analysis and applying it to the individual within the state, the paintings present a politically neutralized projection of those who contemplate the worker not as an individual, or "a stimulant for ideas and practice," but, rather, "a component of the state apparatus," a cog in the machine—an anonymous entity. Wang Hui writes: "What I want to emphasize here is the change in the party's identity: no longer possessing its own distinctive evaluative standpoint or social goals, it can only have a structural-functional relationship to the state apparatus."⁷ Discussing the depoliticization of governmental systems, Wang Hui continues to note that "the Chinese case should also be seen as a symptom of the worldwide worldwide depoliticization."

Installation view of *New Slogan*, Eli Klein Fine Art, New York.

In *New Slogan* one painting, *Use English*, seeing the Beijing Olympics catchphrase: One World, One Dream. Smaller in size than the other paintings in the exhibition, it is hung behind the gallery desk, facing at an angle the much larger *AK-47 (H9)*. The two works express reductions of complex, pluralist contexts. As Carl Schmitt said in a lecture entitled "The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations," in 1929: "There is no longer anyone today who would be deceived by the accumulation of facts as to how much of historical representation and construction is fulfilled by naive projections and identification. Thus we must be aware of our own historical situation."⁸ Looking again at Zhang Dali's painted portraits, Schmitt's idea of naive projection and identification within historically rooted political contexts becomes clearer. There has never been a time in which it is more urgent to understand the historical roots behind global realities.

The One World, One Dream ideology speaks to homogenization and the single global economy as well as to the implications of such an ideology for reality. As Wang Hui notes: "Because all state apparatuses penetrate deeply

Zhang Dali, *Slogan 81*, acrylic on canvas, 2010, 150 × 120 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Eli Klein Fine Art, New York.

into the institutions of daily life, the fundamental existential character of the state... assumes a kind of depoliticized political form. Increasingly, this is now supported by the ideological hegemony of the market."⁹ In this sense, ideological hegemony is disseminated by mechanical reproduction, from the computer systems that drive international markets to the images of Warhol's Campbell's soup cans reproduced on millions of postcards, or even the visual suggestion received from advertising or the social messages transmitted in political campaigns. In the politics, the market system dictates public interaction with the very structures that seek to define—and quantify—entire populations, just as the art market system thrives on defining and quantifying art.

Like *Chinese Offspring*, *New Slogan* exposes the cruel, dehumanizing economic machine through the language of an equally cruel art world machine that treats artworks as commodities. In this light, there is a sense

of growing continuity to Zhang Dali's focus on the individual as disposable pawn in a world of fluctuating values. Indeed, in the twenty-first century, the dictates of the global market economy are becoming ever clearer. The Euro zone crisis has revealed economic and political inadequacies and corruption in nation-states that appear to be disintegrating as a result of centralized policies over a diverse continent, as well as relaxed borders and an immigration crisis on the European Union's Mediterranean borders. Meanwhile, populations around the world are being forced to bear the weight of ballooning public deficits, resulting in a form of economic bondage on national scales presented, via the media, as edited facts and sensational headlines.

Since the 2008 crash, the twenty-first century global economy has revealed itself to be a complex international web in which real political debate is overshadowed by an anesthetizing language of mass-production that has seeped into all levels of society. Thinking back to *Chinese Offspring* and the commercial aesthetics of *New Slogan*, perhaps the moral of the story is this: If we are able to discount the representation of the disenfranchised as art objects, then we are able to discount them in life. With Western-infused elements added to the *New Slogan* paintings, perhaps Zhang Dali has expanded further on his comment that in China everyone is a migrant worker. Today, maybe we all are, no matter where we come from. If that is the case, perhaps it is time to start engaging with what that might mean politically, from both local and global perspectives. You cannot put a price on discourse like that.

¹ Malinda Liu, "China's Great Divide," *Newsweek*, April 10, 2010, <http://www.newsweek.com/2010/04/10/china-s-great-divide.html>.

² "Hukou—longest stopgap policy in China," *People's Daily Online*, March 30, 2011, <http://english.people.com.cn/90001/90780/91365/725015.html>. "Holders of the urban 'hukou' certificate, a brown-colored booklet dictating a person's birth place, current residence, marriage status and education level, remain the privileged among all nationals."

³ Wang Hui notes on the period of urban reforms in China post-1984, which followed on from a phase of rural reforms that took place between 1978 and 1984: "Once the state began to relinquish its control over the organization of industry and commerce—adjusting rather than defining or implementing plans—the old inequalities in the control over resources immediately turned into unequal benefits. For this reason, urban industrial reform did not merely involve the question of state ownership, but became a problem of the whole national economic structure. In these complex conditions, and in the absence of any suitable process of democratic supervision or suitable economic structure, it was almost inevitable that the redistribution of resources and production would result in extreme social inequalities." Wang Hui, *The End of the Revolution: China and the Limits of Modernity, 1989 and Neoliberalism in China* (New York: Verso, 2009), 25. However, recent reports suggest that steps are being taken in China to further recognize migrant worker rights, although "Out of Shenzhen's population of more than 14 million people, only 2.5 million are residents. These 'black' workers and their children are not entitled to health care, education, or pensions in the city because their hukou (residence registration) is elsewhere.... In recent months, the government has also expressed interest in reforming the hukou law to include migrant workers who reach certain standards required of them." "Beijing Considers Easing Hukou Rules," *People's Daily Online*, June 22, 2011, <http://english.people.com.cn/90001/90776/90820/7417268.html>.

⁴ "Zhang Dali," *Art Speak China*, [http://www.artspekchina.org/media/wiki/index.php/Zhang_Dali_%E5%8C%A0%E3%A4%A7%E5%BA%9B.](http://www.artspekchina.org/media/wiki/index.php/Zhang_Dali_%E5%8C%A0%E3%A4%A7%E5%BA%9B)

⁵ Released in March 2011, exclusively on amazon.com, by the Liu Brothers: [http://www.amazon.com/Naked-Uncensored-Collection-Zhang-Dali/dp/B00ANVET0E/ref=sr_1_2?ie=UTF8&qid=1298512424&sr=8-26.](http://www.amazon.com/Naked-Uncensored-Collection-Zhang-Dali/dp/B00ANVET0E/ref=sr_1_2?ie=UTF8&qid=1298512424&sr=8-26)

⁶ Zhang Dali, *Slogans*, September 12–Oct 18, 2008. See the Kiang Gallery press release at <http://www.artnet.com/Galleries/Exhibitions.asp?i=14838&source=2&type=2>.

⁷ Kate Prengel, "Zhang Dali: New Slogan," *cityarts.info*, April 13, 2011, <http://cityarts.info/2011/04/13/zhang-dali-new-slogan>.

⁸ Wang Hui, *The End of the Revolution*, 9.

⁹ Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 80–81.

¹⁰ Wang Hui, *The End of the Revolution*, 9.