



BEIJING

BORN 1963, Harbin, China LIVES Beijing, China STUDIED Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing SERIES 'Dialogue and Demolition', 1993–2006 OTHER GENRES Graffiti, sculpture OTHER CITIES WORKED Bologna

ZHANG DALI

After the events of Tiananmen Square in 1989, Chinese artist Zhang Dali fled to Europe for a six-year period of self-imposed exile. On his return to Beijing in 1995, he was confronted by a city transformed into a sprawling, chaotic demolition site. The People's Republic was engaged in a headlong dash towards capitalist-driven modernity; the traditional vernacular of city walls, courtyard houses and tiny alleyways was in the process of being torn down to make way for shiny new hotels, shopping centres and skyscrapers. Zhang was prompted into a series of anonymous, guerrilla-art actions in which he spray-painted a giant image (sometimes as tall as two metres) of his own head onto the walls of buildings awaiting demolition and marked 'chai' (the Chinese character meaning 'demolish'). The tumultuous structural metamorphosis of the city of Beijing forms the backdrop to Zhang's iconic photographic series 'Dialogue and Demolition'.

Zhang originally trained at China's prestigious Central Academy in Beijing as a painter but the move into spray-painting transformed him into one of China's first graffiti artists. Between 1995 and 1998, he adorned more than 4,000 condemned buildings throughout Beijing with his own image. From the centre of the city to the Third Ring Road, an area spanning about eighty square kilometres, he used the fabric of the city as his own canvas and transformed derelict urban ruins into sites of public art. Then, echoing the practice of US Conceptual performance artists of the 1960s and 1970s, he recorded these gestures with his camera. However, the series did not develop in the way Zhang originally conceived; it is the artist's subsequent evolving use of and attitude to the camera that marks out this now iconic body of work.

In a sense 'Dialogue and Demolition' began in Europe a few years before Zhang returned to China. While living in Bologna, Italy, he was introduced to graffiti and was instantly attracted to this art form that did not exist in the People's Republic. He recalls, 'After my graduation it was very difficult for me financially so I couldn't hide in my studio dreaming about things. I wanted to change reality into art, the things near me into art . . . as an artist I thought I should create something outside the studio, and graffiti was fast and powerful'. Influenced by this anonymous street art as well as by Western artists, such as Keith Haring, he started painting on the city walls of Bologna. At the time he was mainly concerned with anti-war protests focused on the Gulf and sprayed these affirmations in Chinese characters, occasionally

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- 1 *Forbidden City*, Beijing, China, 1998
- 2 *Tangfang Hutong*, Beijing, China, 2001
- 3 *Chaoyangmenwai Shenlu Street*, Beijing, China, 1998

accompanied with a self-image of a bald head. Local artists responded by spray-painting over these images, mistaking his spartan profile for a neo-Nazi symbol and the Chinese characters as socialist propaganda. Zhang was struck by the speed of the response as well as the misunderstandings and he took photographs to document these retorts as they occurred.

On his return to China he was stunned by the changing urban landscape of Beijing and was impatient to see how local artists might react to his spray-painted profile on old buildings and derelict sites. He firmly believed in the visual image's ability to 'incite discourse' and looked forward to generating the kind of interactions he had experienced in Europe. His artist statement reads: '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 the 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.' Zhang was about to be surprised, however; strikingly his interventions met with silence. People reacted with suspicion, indifference, outrage and confusion, but the city did not actively respond, apart from sending workers with buckets of cement to repeatedly cover up the images. Zhang had failed to ignite the 'graffiti war' he had hoped for. Art historian Wu Hung recalls, 'Partly because





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- 5 *Fuhua Mansion*, Beijing, China, 1999
- 5 *Xidan Xiulong Futong*, Beijing, China, 1999
- 6 *Shanghai Jinmao Tower*, Beijing, China, 2000

of the city's irresponsiveness . . . Zhang the artist (not Zhang the social critic) had to explore other possibilities to realise 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 materialise).'

Zhang turned to the camera to explore his central conceit of a dialogue; he started to document and archive people's reactions to his interventions. In one of these photographs, a young boy walks past the image, seemingly unconscious of the image on the wall behind him, he stares directly into the camera with a cool, unresponsive gaze, the spray-painted head seemingly following the boy and his friend entreating their acknowledgement (see image 5). Wu Hung writes, 'This photograph is one of the earliest such snapshots in Beijing, [and it] never fails to chill me with a feeling of inability to communicate'. By recording such reactions, the camera enabled him to transform his work, as he says, 'from a monologue into a dialogue'.

Zhang began to design his interventions primarily to be photographed; he also started to create dialogue between different elements within the composition—framing the spray-painted, demolished, traditional buildings against a backdrop of rising modern construction. He explains, 'I think this concept is very important for this project; at the beginning I wanted to document graffiti, to document the place where I painted the graffiti, but at the end the artwork to be exhibited was not the graffiti but the photo. With time the audience got to see a photo artwork, and the photo became the main character on stage.' The series evolved into one in which he increased the architectural dialogue by juxtaposing demolished old houses and preserved ancient monuments; he then further complicated the gesture by hiring migrant construction workers to hollow out the space inside his silhouetted profile, to create an open wound through which he frames the shimmering modern skyscrapers or preserved ancient monuments (see image 4). The viewer sees 'the old' through the prism of the destroyed. The project itself is still open to debate but what is indisputable is that this body of work has come to symbolize, as Wu Hung states, 'a new image of this city'. Zhang concludes, '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 screens onto which the city is projected.' Zhang immortalizes these 'screens' of bricks and mortar, on which the historical trauma of this age have played out, by framing them through his viewfinder, onto another—this time celluloid—screen.

