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INSIDE

The Challenges and Possibilities of Public Art
in Shanghai

Artist Features: Liu Ding, Wang Wo, Zhang Dali,
Huang Zhiyang, Fong Chung-ray

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Jonathan Goodman

Zhang Dali: Square Klein Sun Gallery, New York June 26–August 30, 2014



Zhang Dali, *Square*, installation view. © Zhang Dali. Courtesy of Klein Sun Gallery, New York.

For decades, Beijing-based artist Zhang Dali has been making art that challenges China's status quo, which, as I expect a large part of the Chinese art world would agree, needs to be challenged. His work has played an important role in the history of contemporary art in China, and his generation has had a major impact on the way social mores are addressed there. Zhang Dali's photographs documenting his graffiti, for example, along with outlines of his head cutout in the ruins of Beijing walls and buildings that were destroyed in order to make room for new architecture during the late 1990s, were signs of humanity in an otherwise dehumanized context. He is recognized as marked with the integrity of an independent—that is, as an artist who has not capitulated to market forces. This is a claim many Chinese artists can no longer make, caught as they are in the mesh of the bubble economy.

In Zhang Dali's exhibition entitled *Square* (Klein Sun Gallery, New York, June 26–August 30, 2014), viewers were confronted with the artist's poetic vision of Tian'anmen Square, a symbol of national prominence in Beijing, the capital city. Besides its purpose of promoting unity, Tian'anmen Square is best remembered as the site where the government brutally killed protestors twenty-five years ago. So, in some sense, Zhang Dali's *Square* memorializes the failure of the democracy movement in China, now often

seen as a tragic attempt at political freedom that came before its time, a time that is yet to be realized. While the title of his exhibition inevitably calls up the memory of the tragic events that destroyed the democracy movement, Zhang Dali has seen fit to correlate that event with the ongoing problem of poverty, especially as it pertains to migrant workers who populate the back streets of Beijing and other cities.

Zhang Dali, *Square No. 4*, 2014, fiberglass and varnish, 190 x 105 x 70 cm. © Zhang Dali. Courtesy of Klein Sun Gallery, New York.



While the press materials for the exhibition explain that Zhang Dali intended to provide his perspective on Tian'anmen Square through the works on display—alluding to the possibility for hope in addition to a history of violence—for me, the show expressed itself in images that conveyed melancholy or an absurd impossibility. In other words, the presence of hope in the face of actual events was insignificant to the point of disappearing. In the exhibition, white birds were hung from the ceiling—images of flight as an active freedom, creating a positive visual signifier of liberty. This was a compelling image, as

during the Cultural Revolution birds were driven from the city, so now there are no birds to be found in Tian'anmen Square. As a result, in Zhang Dali's installation, they now serve as a metaphor for freedom. Birds are also present in the exhibition in the manner of Alfred Hitchcock's 1963 film *The Birds*, clinging to the clothing or perched on the bodies of the cast fiberglass figures representing underprivileged migrant workers in Beijing (Zhang Dali hired models and paid them well to undergo the casting process), emphasizing a sense of passiveness, at times bordering on despair, that is embodied in the way the migrant workers sit or stand. Within this scenario, one hoped for something positive, namely, that the reality portrayed would provoke in viewers an empathetic view toward the workers, and in turn the underclass, who were represented here, but the countenance of these figures was muffled and downcast. They projected little or no assurance that their lives could be bettered in a material sense, and the doves that clung to their clothing only underscored the fact that alienation was to be the lot of these unfortunate people. Zhang Dali's tableau took the viewer to a place where private and public suffering converge—in ways that repeat much of what China has suffered already: endemic poverty.

The issues raised by the exhibition *Square*, then, are more complex than Zhang Dali's seemingly spare arrangement of people and birds might suggest. At what point does the presentation of suffering, in this case one

that seems to elude resolution, attract blame or public judgement? The artist's theme turns on desperation, but it is a desperation that is implied, rather than directly stated. Implication and suggestion go far in the not-so-innocent world of Chinese art, where varied strategies include both oblique and barely hidden critiques of the government's authoritarianism. Now that the Chinese miracle of a stable and robust economy has taken place, it seems almost pointless to ride against the waves of prosperity. But art's place in China has often been to point out ethical discrepancies and egregious mistakes committed by a government that will not tolerate criticism, let alone an independent voice. In line with that tradition, Zhang Dali has taken it upon himself to fashion a silent pageant of figures that resound with what he has called in discussion with me "the artist's pain," something akin to the psychic suffering of the intellectual who remains outside of society. Thus, *Square* makes its points in triple—as a memory of government savagery, as an existential statement underscoring the suffering of China's poor, and as a personal statement by the artist in search of a context that would place him in a moral setting that is meaningful.



We owe Zhang Dali thanks for this understated but important critique of China. At the same time, I wonder if a critical reading of *Square* would be so clear in China itself. One of the biggest problems in contemporary Chinese art is a lack of criticism worthy of its ambitious artists. On one level, it is difficult to hope for much; within the Chinese art system, the writer is often paid by the artist, who then pays the publication to print the article. Therefore, it would seem that any system for critique is impaired from the start.

Zhang Dali, *Square No. 1*, 2014, fiberglass and varnish, 170 x 105 x 74 cm. © Zhang Dali. Courtesy of Klein Sun Gallery, New York.

In addition, censorship of artwork is tight, perhaps leading to constraints on critical commentary about the art. While there may well be consciously intended political implications within a given work, they are not met with extended public scrutiny—not because they are misunderstood, but because the consequences of conveying such understanding when a negative interpretation of the government is published may include a prison term for the critic. The problem also extends to artists themselves—not a far-fetched scenario, as we can see from Ai Weiwei's detainment and imprisonment, meant to punish him for his generally irreverent recalcitrance as much as for his rebellious political actions. Seen in this light, it is fair to characterize Zhang Dali's lyric resistance toward Chinese authoritarianism as something greater than one individual's noncompliance with conventional mores, let alone a rejection of governmental precepts. He is part of a small, but genuine, group of artists who have had the courage to confront

the government with their art—this despite the fact that Ai Weiwei has mostly shown abroad. This rebelliousness has been evident for more than a generation. Beijing's East Village artists, for example, lived in squalid conditions during the early 1990s and made some very challenging work that got under the skin of authorities.

Still, viewers of Zhang Dali's Square must keep in mind that this exhibition occurred in New York, and that any response to it by gallery viewers in China, if it was to be shown there, could be very different. In the West we are used to speaking our minds, even if it rarely seems to result in effective change. But in mainland China, even a subtle show of empathy for those who are repressed such as Square proposes may well have consequences for the artist, the very least of them being the shutdown of the exhibition. The Chinese state may ignore the apolitical, stylistically oriented efforts of the talented graduates from the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) and beyond, but what good is an art culture that is subdued by fear to the point of self-censorship? In a political sense, the government takes Chinese artists seriously, and there is genuine trepidation on the part of political authorities concerning an artist's political independence. As a result, there exists a great threat to artists' autonomy, both in their lives as creative people and in their personal circumstances.

As a consequence of the political pressures that are placed upon Chinese artists, Zhang Dali has often used allegory to make his point. It doesn't hurt that allegory can be read a number of ways; its variable readings disguise the artist's precise feelings, which may not be acceptable to the government. This does not mean that Zhang Dali is being willfully obscure, only that he is operating in a space that is indeterminate—in large part because he is relying on an intuitive exploration of the material at hand. Everything about Square is seemingly random—the figures are asymmetrically placed in different poses about the room, and the birds group into flocks that, while beautiful, could signal at the same time little more than their existence in mid-air. This arrangement is composed to hide the obvious; it reads like a story of poverty narrated in an atmosphere of anonymity and, sadly, intended for no one in particular, although the suffering evident in the figures is clear.

A facile reading of Zhang's Square would be to inflate it to some degree with existentialist precepts about the inexorability of injustice and economic disparity that is inherent to modern life everywhere. But this doesn't characterize the installation accurately. Square is in fact a critique of the aftereffects of a government callously determined to maintain its power, no matter what the price. This is what Zhang Dali *means*, but he cannot *say* so. This results in a counterweighted effect, where one understands the circumstances but is unable to openly articulate them. So much of Chinese life, in this writer's experience, is like this! One makes a point, like Zhang Dali, by being indirect—or worse, by not speaking at all. Of course, this generalization is open to exceptions. When Ai Weiwei was first imprisoned and no one knew exactly where he was, the intelligentsia in China certainly



discussed his detention. But there was little if any public outcry about his restraint, a failure no doubt caused by people's fear that they too might be detained. We can see a similar hesitation on the part of Zhang Dali, who simultaneously refers and does not refer to controversial historical incidents. This has nothing to do with his mettle as an artist; rather, it is based on the recognition that those in power tend to understand conventional truth and are confused by ambiguity.

Zhang Dali, *Square No. 10*, 2014, fiberglass and varnish, 80 x 170 x 93 cm. © Zhang Dali. Courtesy of Klein Sun Gallery, New York.



Even so, the acclaimed work *Book from the Sky (Tianshu)* from 1988 by noted artist Xu Bing, for example, was received with mixed reviews by the Chinese government, which mistrusted the denial of meaning illustrated by the thousands of illegible characters that comprise the installation. Public criticism from authorities was one reason Xu Bing moved to America, where the engagement of intellectual freedoms were more agreeable with him. He stayed there for seventeen years. But now he is Vice President of Central

Zhang Dali, *Square No. 9*, 2014, fiberglass and varnish, 90 x 135 x 74 cm. © Zhang Dali. Courtesy of Klein Sun Gallery, New York.

Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) in Beijing, a position that has earned him mistrust from some within the artistic community in the sense that he is now an official spokesman for the school, which has ties to government. Taking the position within CAFA may well have been a mistake on Xu Bing's part, and the independent position taken by an artist like Zhang Dali stands out in contrast, especially in light of the implicitly uncompromising stand he takes in the current installation. *Square*, with all its ambiguities, makes clear that art stands for something, and, as time passes, one can begin to understand the implications embedded within the installation, a condemnatory recognition of the reality of suffering as opposed to the justification of ideology, the latter an abstraction corroding human dignity. The humanism suggested in Zhang Dali's sympathetic treatment of a vulnerable underclass is both a critique and a cure. Even if the problem of poverty cannot be eradicated, some good may be achieved by adopting an empathic embrace of the a human being's need for recognition and self-worth.

Along the walls of the gallery, Zhang Dali installed cyanotype photographs of birds (this cameraless process consists of letting light create a silhouette on light-sensitive paper). In *Deep Blue Sky No. 2* (2013), the birds, with



Zhang Dali, *Square*, installation view. © Zhang Dali. Courtesy of Klein Sun Gallery, New York.

their outstretched wings and feet, form a puzzle-like display in white against the blue of the paper. These are more hopeful images that stand in contradiction to the melancholy of the fiberglass figures encumbered with doves. The combination of these two points of view, one positive and the other fatalistic, add up to a balanced hypothesis that quite realistically combines reassurance and pessimism in regard to art making, politics, and human behaviour. It is interesting that Zhang Dali turns here to nature to make his point; nature stands out as innocent, functioning as a corrective to the human tendency to make mistakes. These birds, therefore, symbolize a way out—literally, a flight toward disenfranchisement—that serves to oppose the history of the 1989 massacre at Tian’anmen Square; this imagery can be extended to include the desire for freedom everywhere. *Square* may not be entirely precise in its meaning, but the general message is pointed and moving. One of Zhang Dali’s great strengths as an artist is his ability to make his visual details—in particular the poses of the migrant workers and the movement of the birds—both large and specific; the fusion of the two stances results in a highly successful artwork that merges opposites in an unusual way. The birds are both beautiful in their own right and constitute a symbol of the breathing space we need for a healthy society. The two expressions work together as well as alone.

All in all, the convergence of the installation *Square* with the cyanotype photographs calls attention to a complicated reality in China, one scarred



Zhang Dali, *Deep Blue Sky*
No. 2, 2013, cyanotype,
photogram, and ink on
rice paper. © Zhang Dali.
Courtesy of Klein Sun
Gallery, New York.



Zhang Dali, *Pigeons*
No. 1, 2013, cyanotype,
photogram, and ink on
rice paper. © Zhang Dali.
Courtesy of Klein Sun
Gallery, New York.

by the occasion of bloodshed, even though the exhibition is not so literal as to include representation of actual violence. The democracy movement in China, fueled by the students' rebellious optimism, was crushed, its leaders imprisoned or exiled. Zhang Dali, in response to this historical truth, has fashioned an affecting tableau that calls attention in subtle ways to the record of what happened. And while the Square in a direct representation of student protests, the tragedy of the crushed rebellion is reprised

in the affecting vulnerability of the migrant workers. But the exhibition is also more than that; it describes the psychic state of the poor—a problem that exists everywhere, not only in China, and that extends his point to global proportions. The use of birds as symbols of freedom provides Zhang Dali's audience an image of resolve, taking the Chinese people beyond some of the misfortunes of their past. This does not mean that he forgets what happened; indeed, the show suggests that the events of twenty-five years ago cannot be pushed aside. But the existential quality of Square convinces us that the points Zhang Dali is making exist beyond historical specificity; they attain a view of humanity that is startlingly real. In this way, he achieves the status of world citizen and world artist, one who helps open up the lines of communication with the rest of the world that China has at times denied during its recurring periods of inversion and mistrust. Thus, Square reminds us that a specific situation is capable of being read into a world-oriented outlook, a sign that Zhang Dali's art brilliantly addresses the global through the particular.