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AN ERA WITHOUT MEMORIES

CHINESE CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY
ON URBAN TRANSFORMATION

Thames & Hudson





79. Zhang Dali, *Dialogue*, No. 95a, 1995

Construction sites can be found everywhere in China: buildings masked by scaffolding, and the streets suffused with energy and confusion. Returning to Beijing after a six-year stay in Bologna, Zhang Dali (b. 1963) found a strange new reality. In his words: 'This is the city I feel so familiar with, yet at the same time it's unrecognizable.' With the power of urban development in mind, Zhang Dali believed that art would only be meaningful if it went outside of the artist's studio and back to reality. In 1995, he decided to pursue the graffiti practice he had first begun in Italy, seeing the whole city as his studio [79]. 'I used graffiti as my weapon, to connive with the oppression in my soul,' he has said. 'I took the photos as artworks, or as a visual archive which records the process of the city being dismembered and the new life born through the ruins. Changes are taking shape under a sky full of dust and within a forest of reinforced concrete. Some people keep telling me that the future will be much better. I don't know how good it will be, but I do know for sure that life is changing, and I feel the urge to document the changes and to express myself.'²⁴ Zhang Dali's graffiti was duplicated and gradually spread across the city. On walls, bridges and other public spaces, a spray-painted silhouette of a large bald head, alone or in groups, became a familiar image to many residents of Beijing. The profile quite clearly came from the artist's own identity. Thousands were produced in free-hand, mostly on construction sites, to form part of the urban landscape or, as the title indicates, to initiate a 'dialogue' with the city and its transformation. For example, it was scrawled on a half-demolished building in a Shanghai residential area, above an advertisement for a removal company and with the vast Jin Mao Tower rising behind the wasteland [80]. The sudden appearance of the artist visually disturbs the development, negotiates between the old and new landscapes, and witnesses all the acts of destruction and construction.

In the series *Demolition*, an extension to the graffiti work, Zhang Dali chiselled out his painted heads with the assistance of some hired construction workers. The resulting holes provide a glimpse in the distance of either a surviving cultural legacy, such as a corner of the Forbidden City covered with gold tiles [81], or a modern building in the process of construction, such as Beijing's World Financial Centre [82]. Zhang Dali's graffiti was one of the simplest forms of public art, or mass art, and yet he turned it into a performance, presented through photographs. As art historian Wu Hung has said: 'On the one hand, they record site-specific art projects that have been carried out by the artist. On the other, these projects were designed largely to be photographed, resulting in two-dimensional images as independent works of art. Consequently, the role of Zhang Dali's graffiti self-portraits also changed: no longer stimulating interactions on the street, it became a pictorial sign that heightened an urban visual drama.'²⁵ In fact, when the head shape was carved into the wall, the graffiti became sculptural and architectural. It was no longer merely a visual testimony to the performance; it now became an artistic action determinedly applied to the architectural ruins to commit the artist himself as part of the destroyed homes. Work on the *Demolition* and *Dialogue* series lasted for more than ten years, as evidenced by the last piece, made at the end of 2006 [83].



80. Zhang Dali, *Dialogue*, No. 101a, 2000





(opposite)

81. Zhang Dali, *Demolition*, No. 125a, 1998

82. Zhang Dali, *Demolition*, No. 123, 1998





83. Zhang Dali, *Dialogue*, No. 1210a, 2006