

From Pencil Drawings to Graffiti Tags: An Interview with Zhang Dali

Katherine Grube

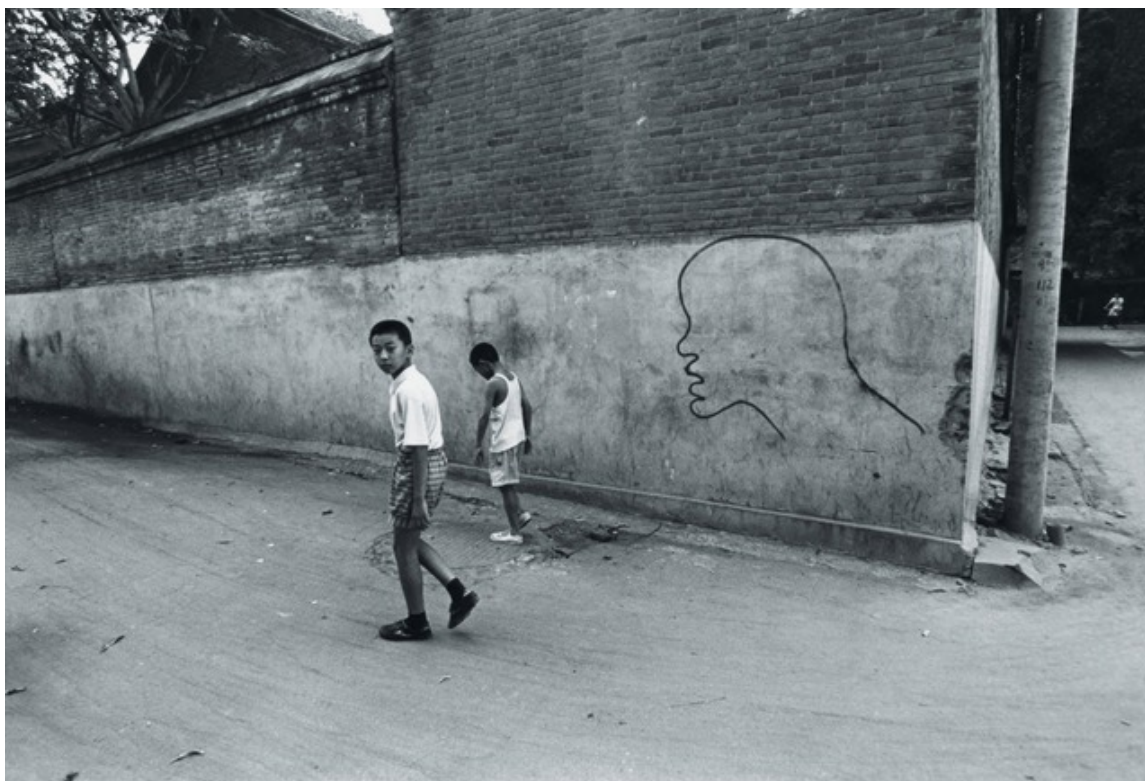
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Zhang Dali (b. 1963) is best known for his archival projects: *Dialogue and Demolition*, a ten-year project that cataloged the destruction of Beijing's vernacular architecture through the documentation of his graffiti tag on the city's walls and in alleyways, and *A Second History*, a project of equal duration that paired archival photographic prints with their altered doubles. If the manipulated image and the manipulated landscape inform Zhang's practice, they are illustrative of a broader thematic within his work: the gap between representation and reality. This sensibility was fostered as a youth drawing idealized revolutionary workers from within a factory compound in China's Northeast, and continued to develop with China's social transformations over the past thirty years.

This interview, conducted by Katherine Grube, took place over two sittings in August and September 2015 as Zhang was preparing for his mid-career retrospective — entitled “From Reality to Extreme Reality: The Road of Zhang Dali” — at the United Art Museum, in Wuhan. All images courtesy of the artist.



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Zhang Dali, Dialogue: Xidan Xiulang Hutong, 1999, © Zhang Dali.

Katherine Grube: Dali, you have mentioned that the earliest encouragement you received to pursue artmaking was in elementary school when you were selected to draw the blackboard newspapers.

Zhang Dali: At least twice a week, I would stay late after class and draw the classroom's blackboard newspaper. I drew Lei Feng, Mao's Little Red Book, or red flags and at the base I would add decorative flowers and encircle the text and images with a clear border. Soon, because of the repetition of forms, I became very skilled at drawing these things. I remember that I mostly sketched sunflowers [laughs.] Mao was the sun and we, his children, like sunflowers, always faced the sun.

KG: You grew up in a state-owned factory in Harbin that produced military fighter jets. In 1970, when you were eight years old, the factory relocated to Jingdezhen, in Jiangxi province, as part of the Third Front's relocation of China's military industries to the country's interior. What do you recall about moving to the south?

ZDL: An important reason why I began studying art was because of the open-air kilns in Jingdezhen, where I could watch potters painting wet clay prior to firing. The entire process required such skill. Every bowl and flower vase was unique. Every day I watched the ceramicists at work as they painted traditional motifs such as orchids or Chinese opera characters, such as Chang'e and Guan Yu. I was struck by the traditional modes of production in Jingdezhen because the techniques had survived relatively untouched through the Cultural Revolution and Mao years.

I started learning to paint soon after we arrived in Jingdezhen. It was purely by chance that I started to study painting. I was placed into the school's fine arts class, and by the age of twelve, I had started to learn Western-style figure drawings and pencil sketches. The *Journal of Yanquan Workers Sketches* appeared at about the time I started to paint, and it was enormously influential for me, as I think it was to many artists. It was a sketchbook of workers at work, and the naturalistic ways in which the workers were depicted resonated with the scenes of workers in my everyday life. In this sense, I suppose my work has always depicted the common laborer.



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Zhang Dali, Figure Sketch, 1981, pencil on paper, 52 x 39 cm, © Zhang Dali.

KG: Could we say that the architecture of Jingdezhen — the openness of its structures, the visual accessibility of ceramics production and of painterly craft — influenced your artistic development?

ZDL: You’ve raised a good question in the sense of how the urban structure impacts the individual. There is an enormous connection between the individual and the urban environment, but exactly how does this relationship affect the individual’s daily life, work, and way of thinking? This is a bit more complicated. [He laughs.] I was able to observe painting as a practice because we moved to Jingdezhen. The humid, hot climate in southern cities creates much more open city. You can observe things through the always-open windows and doors. This sort of daily exposure to different lifestyles, and professions can suddenly inspire the idea that “I can do that too!” The biggest difference between studying art in the north and south is that in the north you would only study art if you had a reason. You would have to attend a specialized school to study art in the north. In the south, the possibility of being exposed to art was woven into the city fabric. In the south, it is a horizontal plane of influence, whereas the north has a very linear, vertical structure of transmission. I came from a family of workers, so an interest in art and in becoming an artist wasn’t passed down to me. Chance, or our chance move to Jingdezhen, played a significant part in my becoming an artist.

KG: When did you know you wanted to become an artist?

ZDL: I knew I wanted to be a painter [*huajia*] when I was fourteen years old, but I hadn’t considered becoming an artist [*yishujia*]. I didn’t know what an artist was. A painter in Maoist China was assigned work in

a state-run work unit and typically worked in the propaganda department. This is what I wanted to do, and in this regard, I started working in art in the same way as everyone else. At the time, there was no concept of “art” because there was no possibility of independent artistic expression or making a living off artwork. After 1976, artists experienced an enormous transformation because they could determine the content of their artworks and have it reflect their personal experiences. Artists gained the ability to breathe.

It wasn't until after I started university that I wanted to be an artist. Prior to that, I pursued a rigorous formal training in order to test into university. To attend university at that time in China was to dramatically change your future. It allowed you to leave your hometown and go to Beijing. For me, university was everything.



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Zhang Dali, Figure Sketch, 1983, pencil on paper, 79 x 54.5 cm, © Zhang Dali.

KG: Did the studio classes at the China Academy of Arts and Crafts and your training in the Book Design and Printmaking Department differ from this early arts education?

ZDL: My way of thinking about art advanced at university. We were taught that form was most important, which was a revelation for those of us who had previously studied academic realism. We were taught how to think abstractly about the pictorial plane as a collection of lines, points, and planes. Our professors taught us that art's highest goal was the creation of new art forms. I remember once in class our professor, Liu Chuande, picked up a white piece of paper with a footprint on it and hung it on the blackboard. He said, “Look at how

beautiful this is. Natural beauty always exceeds that which we create.” We all looked at him dumbfounded because to us it was just a gritty imprint of a sneaker. Then he made us look at the impression as form, as the surface contrast between black and white and as a pattern of lines. Liu was severely criticized during the Anti-Bourgeois Liberalization Campaign in 1987 for instructing us that a shoe’s impression could be beautiful. For the “mistake” of privileging form over content, he was almost expelled from the university. A student had reported that he was promoting elitist and decadent forms of artmaking.



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Zhang Dali, Red, Black, and White series, 1987, oil on rice paper, 187 x 180 cm, © Zhang Dali.

KG: I’m curious about how pictorial composition was taught at the Central Academy of Fine Arts and Design. The book and magazine covers you designed from the period as well as your early ink painting series, *Black, White, and Red* (1986–87, pictured above) stylistically diverge from your earlier realist sketches and landscape paintings. Your work begins to operate in the idioms of international modernism.

ZDL: We received a rigorous education in modernist formalism that taught us how to parse the visual world into abstracted forms. At the time, we were also processing various modern movements — Cubism, Fauvism, Impressionism, and conceptualisms such Dada and Surrealism — for the first time. We experienced these movements visually as form because we didn’t understand their historical and contextual background. We also were introduced to so many different movements at once that we couldn’t possibly distinguish between them.

However, they did produce an interest in form, if not in the concepts behind the movements themselves. In our third year, we began to explore art as form with professors like Wu Guanzhong.

KG: You declined your government-assigned work position after graduation in 1987 and moved to the community of artists living in Yuanmingyuan. What do you remember about the period from June 1987 to July 1989 when you lived there?

ZDL: These two years were really difficult. Time passed very slowly, even though looking back on it now it was a very short period in my life. Time passed slowly because every day we would get up and think about where we were going to eat. We had no food because we had no money and no work unit. The good thing about that time was that life was simpler and China's market economy wasn't fully developed. We could call on friends with work-unit canteens to help feed us.



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A Soldier's Story, playbill and set design (Zhang Dali's poker card set at back), 1988, Beijing © Zhang Dali.

KG: In 1988, you collaborated on two occasions with your then flatmate Mou Sen to create the posters, invitations, set design, and costume design for two experimental theater productions, which he directed. The first was an adaptation of Eugène Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* in 1987 and the second was an adaptation of Igor Stravinsky's *The Soldier's Tale* in 1988. How did that collaboration come about?

ZDL: I got to know Mou Sen through friends and he suggested that we move to Yuanmingyuan. We were flatmates for two years and lived in a single room no bigger than this couch [laughs]. He had also just graduated from university and was passionate about the theater. He wanted to stage a production and asked if I would be the set designer. I thought it sounded like fun, so agreed and that was how *Rhinoceros*, Mou Sen's first theater piece, came about. The production itself was fairly basic. We had nothing, not even a real stage. I designed the invitation cards and painted the actors' faces as you would in Beijing opera [laughs]. I just painted whatever I wanted with the idea of intensifying their facial expressions under the stage lights. I wanted to emphasize that this person wasn't just a person but also a symbol. It was a modernist play whose objective was to prevent the actors' identities from becoming permanently fixed, and the face paint reflected that aspect.

KG: What about *A Soldier's Tale*?

ZDL: We had a stage for *A Soldier's Tale*. [He laughs.] The play has two acts and I designed separate sets for each. The first act discusses the soldier's fate and I designed a backdrop with a poker-card motif to reflect the uncertainty of chance. The cards' different suits and ranks emphasized the element of luck. For the second scene, I hung old fabrics from the ceiling to create baglike draperies that resembled those that festoon palaces. Under the stage lights, our tattered bedsheets and curtains were rather elegant. Thinking about it now, this might have been my first installation because without the play I wouldn't have had the opportunity to work with space [laughs]. I wouldn't have had access to that much room otherwise. This experience asked me to move from ink painting to a spatial practice, and it was from this time that I knew I wanted to be an artist and what type of artist I wanted to be. I started to define my own approach to artmaking and use this method to determine how to arrange elements in space. My experience as set designer was useful in terms of teaching me how to exhibit, arrange, and make objects for and in space.

KG: You were one of five artists featured in Wu Wenguang's 1991 documentary, *Bumming in Beijing*, a film that is commonly identified with the beginning of the independent documentary film movement in China. Was it *A Soldier's Story* that was part Wu Wenguang's documentary *Bumming in Beijing*? How did Wu Wenguang approach you to be in the film? What was the filming process like?

ZDL: No. Mou Sen's performance in Wu Wenguang's film was filmed in 1990 after I had left China. Wu Wenguang didn't really explain the project, but knew that we — as independent artists — would make a good story. Wu Wenguang studied literature as an undergraduate at Yunnan University and had developed a narrative sensibility about the times and the subjects that reflected it. When we started filming, I was extremely nervous because I had never been in front of the camera. It is completely different from speaking with someone face to face. You're facing a machine and you just keep talking and you don't know what you're saying [laughs]. The director asks you to speak, so you just speak. I had no idea what to say. Then you would stop. Start. Speak. Stop again. [He laughs.] I really had nothing to say then. I wasn't able to present myself. It's not like now when I can speak for five hours on end. I was so young then and had no experience. But it was okay. We made a film.

KG: Did the villagers living in Yuanmingyuan understand why there were crews filming you? What was your relationship with your neighbors like?

ZDL: The villagers didn't understand. They had never seen a camera before and had no idea what it was. The camera existed outside of the realm of their experience. I remember when AIDS had just become national news. My landlord came by and said, "Dali, you know there is a disease where you die of loving someone else too much?" He had misheard the illness's name. I had no idea how to respond to him.



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Zhang Dali, Red, Black, and White series, 1986, oil on rice paper, 74 x 54 cm, © Zhang Dali.

KG: You abandoned ink painting when you moved to Italy. Why?

ZDL: My life and living environment had nothing to do with ink or Chan Buddhism, so I cast them aside. In Italy from 1990 to 1994, I went to a lot of galleries and museums. I came into contact with arte povera. I had several shows in Bologna. I developed as an artist, but I didn't entirely disregard my academic training. I still looked at the world as a collection of abstracted forms. I looked at the world through the same set of eyes.



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Zhang Dali, Dialogue: East Second Ring Road, Dingmen Bridge, 1995, © Zhang Dali.

KG: It was in Italy that you began working with graffiti and photography and came to view the photographic lens as a weapon. What do you mean by that?

ZDL: There are two principle ways I view photography as a weapon: the first is as a weaponized criticism. War is this type of critical stance. The second type is as a critical weapon. This is strategic and utilizes literature, painting, photography, graffiti, and other art forms as a weapon to revolt against the facets of the mainstream

institutional culture that restrict us. For me, graffiti became a weapon, first against myself and my outmoded way of thinking. It was a rejection of ink painting, oil painting, and Chan Buddhism and a way to critique myself. Second, I also wanted to criticize the mainstream cultural establishment. I thought culture as presented in museums had become a lifeless corpse, but we have no way to overturn institutions. So I turned to photography and graffiti as a mode of resistance.

For as long as I made graffiti, I took photographs. For ten years. The photographic process related to *Dialogue and Demolition* taught me a lot. It taught me how to classify large amounts of information and structure a project so that it will have historical value, which became important for *A Second History*. The practice I developed around graffiti and photography pushed me beyond the formalist training I received and asked me to manage and order the various elements in my work. I came to know how to take something and place it within my work. I learned how to frame shots, to select angles and perspectives. I matured and became an artist through this series. I transformed from being a painter [*huajia*] to being an artist [*yishujia*] because my ideas began to take precedent over form. With this, medium also became secondary to my ideas. My artistic approach entered a new stage in which form became less important than my use of form to communicate my ideas.

KG: It seems that one of the first moments when you realized art could penetrate reality and capture its underlying dynamics was in 1977, after you saw several images of Honoré Daumier's political and social caricatures. What attracted you to Daumier's work?

ZDL: I snuck into the library in Jingdezhen and stole a few fine art books. Daumier's was among them. Daumier's *Third Class Carriage* (c. 1862–64) was the first time I had seen an honest, but ugly, depiction of the working class. His works were an authentic [*zhenshi*] representation of his social reality, and this deeply impressed me. My father was a factory worker and I grew up in a factory complex. The workers' real living conditions and the workers I saw in [Maoist-era] propaganda were entirely different. Propaganda poster workers were big, strong, rosy cheeked, and beautiful. But we lived in a real working-class family. The workers I saw in my everyday life were completely different from those in representation.



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Zhang Dali, Study of Daumier's Sketches, 1977, carbon on paper, 19 x 27 cm, © Zhang Dali.

KG: In the 1990s, photographers and filmmakers in China began pursuing the authentic or truthful [*zhenshi*] in their work. The authentic was at once a rejection of the construction of the “real” [*xianshi*] under socialist realism but the real’s distortion by ideology. What drove you to pursue authenticity in your work? How did the photographic lens aid you in pursuing an authentic form of representation?

ZDL: The Maoist era was a uniquely politicized period. I grew up in a worker’s family and the politicized propaganda was particularly potent and present. But I was part of a politicized underground. Being born a worker taught me to see social phenomena that other people don’t notice. But after the Maoist era, in 1977 when I found out that workers could test into university and that I could test into university and receive a much better professional training, it seemed like a whole new era. Growing up in a worker’s family, the reality I lived with diverged drastically from that in the propaganda posters.

KG: Your life seems like a compression of different eras and different times.

ZDL: In many ways, yes. I was born in the Maoist era, began studying art in a half-Maoist, half-reformist period, went to university during the reform era, left China and returned in the market-driven 1990s. From an artistic perspective, mass culture shaped the art of 1970 to 1977. From 1977 to 1983, the measure of artistic value lay in technical mastery. From 1985 to 1993 was a period of modernist formalism whereas everything afterward privileged ideas over form. When I look at pictures of myself, I sometimes think, “Is that me?” You know it’s you, yet it can’t be you. It is the Zhang Dali from that time. He was like that then, but where did he go? Now he is totally different. Perhaps in several years I won’t remember what the me of now is like either.

Katherine Grube is a PhD candidate at New York University. She was a 2014 Fulbright Scholar at Peking University and received the 2013 Asia Art Archive–Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Greater China Research Grant.

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