

On Imagination and the City:

Interview with Zhang Dali

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Zhang Dali is a multifaceted artist, always experimenting in new ways to express the reality beyond reality, afford insights into social issues and meditate upon the human condition. Born in Harbin, China, in 1963, he studied at the Central Academy of Arts and Design in Beijing, where he graduated in 1987. After graduation he did not take the job assigned to him by the government. Still, he remained in Beijing as an independent artist, and became one of the first to settle in the Yuanmingyuan artist village. From 1989 to 1995 he lived in Bologna, where he discovered graffiti while exploring the back alleys of this Italian city. In 1995, after returning to Beijing, he started working on the *Dialogue and Demolition Project* and in 1998 he became a public figure, known as the first graffiti artist in China. As a socially engaged artist, his practice stands as a comment on the impact of urban development as well as a poignant social critique drawing attention to issues such as the condition of internal migrants and civil rights. Series such as *AK-47*, *Slogan*, *One Hundred Chinese*, *Chinese Offspring*, and *We* are amongst some of his most engaging works. After 2003, Zhang Dali turned his focus to Weltanschauung, the structures that sustain the Chinese ways of thinking and being, and has since then been using various media including photography, sculpture, installation and cyanotype to create *A Second History*, *Visual Machine*, *Man and Beast*, *Brownian Movement*, *World's Shadows*, and *Square*.

Zhang Dali lives and works in Beijing. He has been exhibiting his work in museums and galleries around the world since the late 1990s. His recent exhibitions include “Zhang Dali”, Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Buenos Aires, Argentina (2015), “World’s Shadow,” Kunstverein Ludwigsburg, Ludwigsburg, Germany (2015), “From Reality to Extreme Reality: Zhang Dali Retrospective,” United Art Museum, Wuhan, China (2015), “Square,” Klein Sun Gallery, New York (2014), and “Zhang Dali - Second History,” Luxun Academy of Fine Arts Museum, Shenyang, China (2013).

There is a strong connection between the human body and the city that pervades the majority of your work. The human body seems to be a carrier of collective urban memory, a product of social and political control, but also a site of suffering and trauma. Could we therefore say that in your work the body represents the contemporary city as a wounded entity, an entity that needs to be further humanized?

The human body has always been important in art expression. Nature has created a wonderful and perfect human body, but many of us are not satisfied with it. The “City” is a body created out of the human mind. The way in which a city is created, planned and used is an expression of the human mind. These two bodies (a construction of nature and a construction of the human mind) are both part of existence. In my art, these two parts, as they are now in contemporary China, are very prominent problems/issues. In the last 30 years, great changes have occurred; although I don’t think we have gone very far on the big improvements in material life, on the path of spiritual development. The government has stressed that the basic human right is the right to existence and survival, but the very existence of the individual has not received any protection, on the contrary, it has been damaged. The formal structure of the city has been completely destroyed by a new form of capitalistic spoilage. What I express in my artworks are two forms of pain happening in the city in this contemporary era. In my heart I feel even more pain than in my natural body. We, as individuals, have lost roots and have no home to return to. We have lost memory of the past. We don’t know direction and don’t have a goal.

Your *art of memory* becomes a way of resisting destruction and demanding a re-orientation of social priorities, opening up space for generative controversies of how to reconsider ways in which imaginaries could be constructed, established, circulated and reformed. In your opinion, in which novel ways can the experiential aspect of moving through the world be explored in order to preserve history, memory and a meaningful past?

I think art is a very good way of documenting history. Of course, we, as artists, always want to create something new, but in the process we have to revise the past, we have to ponder about tradition. I can say that without a deep understanding of the past and tradition there can be no innovative art. Naturally we can also say that each art revolution has opposed tradition, but in doing so it has in fact continued

tradition, so that tradition could have a new vital force and not be destroyed and forgotten. In history, we can see that each and every new creation has become part of tradition at some point. My art also has this responsibility and this destiny. Of course, what I paint today is not the traditional Chinese painting, but that tradition is not extinct in my art. The force of my creative process comes from two sources: the horizontal source is the reality I live in, the life of people and the environment around me; the vertical source comes from tradition. Nobody can break away from its own tradition and live in a vacuum, it's just not possible.

In the beginning of your career, you were working outdoors, anonymously, in ruined places and walls of urban buildings marked for demolition. Why did you feel the need, from a certain moment, to bring your works into institutional sites of diffusion such as museums and art galleries? As it happened with other artists around the world from the 1970s, was it also a matter of legitimizing your work and enhancing its artistic value?

I have thought about this problem for a long time. On the mental/spiritual aspects, if we revive the past, it's not necessarily a kind of backwardness or nostalgia. I don't consider myself a graffiti artist, although others may often consider me so. I have created a tag and I have had the need to build a dialogue with the city. The profit-oriented powers in charge of the re-construction of the cities made me very angry. I really don't understand the violation of private property. When I started painting graffiti, at that time, in China, there were huge demolitions going on all over the place. Up to now, such demolitions are still going on, although at a slower pace. I have changed my reactions and I'm no longer an artist just reacting to emotions. Moreover, Chinese society has now accepted and incorporated graffiti, graffiti is a fashion among young people, so I don't use this tool any more. For me it is over. At the time I was making graffiti I took many photos, many of these photos have been collected and exhibited. These photos are a documentation of the destruction of the city, they are photos of a corpse.



Image 1. Dialogue and Demolition 1998 125 A. (100X150cm)
© Zhang Dali



Image 2. Dialogue and Demolition 1999 42 (100X150cm)
© Zhang Dali

As Dovey (1999) writes, practices of place-making¹ - as inventions of the future - are inherently political, and the academic task is to make clear whose interests are being served. How can society in general and art in particular keep on opening room for innovation and imagination? What is required to imagine other ways of thinking about space?

In China there is no academy, since the so-called academics are just at the service of the government. There is only one power and one right, it is a phallic power, continuously raping the social body. The government officials are strange people from the countryside. I don't think they have any knowledge about space planning; they are only concerned with their own personal petty interests. The way places/spaces have been remodeled all over China is only one and the same: it's not traditional and it's not contemporary, it's a mass of rubbish. I completely agree with what you stated in the question: interests served and displayed in the creation of new spaces. They are connected with capitalism and have changed China's future. I have to stress here that, in order to create any beautiful and functional urban space, first you have to draw clear limits to these barbaric and cruel powers. All the buildings, constructions, and urban plans must have limits and rules.

Imaginarities have an effect as they represent a system of meanings that govern a given social structure while justifying new investments and legitimizing the state's capacity to act as responsible stewards of the public good. In this sense, imaginaries serve both as the ends of policy and as instruments of legitimation. But they also open up imaginaries and realities of better city-life that bring about *constitutive others*, which Laclau and Mouffe (1985)² found helpful to discuss what is absent present in the network, what also constitutes the network without being present. For example, East Germany is the absent present in the imagination of West Germany and thereby the constitutive other. How can Chinese spatial imaginary become more topologically complex and less controlled in order to do justice to the uncertainty that Otherness brings with it?

¹ Kim Dovey, (1999), *Framing Places: mediating power in built form*. London: Routledge.

² Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985). *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. London: Verso.

I think from 1949 on this government has constructed imaginaries, they wanted us to dream. Now they talk about the Chinese Dream. We don't really know what this is in specific. We don't know the directions taken to build our future. Capital and power are tied to each other and everybody is crazy. Today's China is richer than it was 30 years ago, but now the pressure and stress is much bigger. In fact, when a person from the countryside comes to the city, such person has no kind of protection, from renting a house, health, education, there is no equal treatment of citizens. The power of capital/profit under the domain of political power is a very scary phenomenon. The government's propaganda promotes the Chinese Dream, but this is very different from actual real life. The Chinese Dream is a kind of excitement, not a detailed plan. Maybe the Internet has made us see/envision? some hope, in the sense that we can see, through new technologies, new ways to imagine and design things. But at the same time, it has given the government a new tool to control us. The Internet police is everywhere. No matter what, I think the Internet era has opened a new space in front of us.

In *Chinese Offspring* you bring visibility to the issue of internal migrant workers, a segment of Chinese society that, although playing an extremely active economic role – for they have been behind the construction and reshaping of contemporary urban environments –, is still suffering prejudice, abuse and exclusion. The resin sculptures of one hundred bodies, bare-naked and hung upside down, seem to emanate a strong sense of ambiguity, as if they were liminal beings caught between vulnerability and resistance. Do you consider that artworks such as these may help change the social attitudes of Chinese city-dwellers towards such groups?

I think the strength of the artist is not so big that it can make the change you mention. I think my strength is to produce artworks and express my opinion, but not so much as to change social attitude. The masses don't go to museums, they have a very low level of education, they wouldn't be able to understand the motive/intention of my creation. Of course, I use all my capacity, but the result will influence only a small number of people. The majority is not concerned with art at all.

China is experiencing an urban-rural migration in a scale not seen since 1978. Today, approximately 520 million Chinese live in cities. In 2020 the authorities expect an increase of about 60 percent, which means that

more than 250 million people will move from the countryside to the cities in the next ten years. Such mass movement is posing many challenges for China. All this is also changing the way notions such as progress and a better city life are being presented to Chinese citizens. Is the motto “promise for a better life” becoming a meaningless figure of speech?

In this process, apart from benefit for the real estate sector, I don't think there is a real change in the lives of the majority. If private property does not receive protection, the basic rights of the individual are not receiving respect, therefore, the so called “urbanization” becomes meaningless. As I said above, if we lack, for instance, education, or equal rights before the law, or health services, or public hygiene, equal distribution and accessibility of energy, the so-called urbanization is just a real estate campaign. The very expensive houses we can buy have actually only a land use right, and only for 70 years is the property granted. I really don't know what will happen to these properties in 70 years. There is no feeling of safety. In the construction of new cities, the tradition and the body have been again and again heavily damaged.

Your latest exhibition *From Reality to Extreme Reality* has just been inaugurated at the United Art Museum, Wuhan, a city located in Central China. Before that you have also presented your works in other Chinese provincial cities. In a country such as China, where artists still have to work under relatively dense limitations, do you consider provincial museums and art galleries have the ability to push the creative boundaries and are important vehicles for higher freedom of artistic expression?

Yes, in the south of China there are less limitations. The capital city is more controlled. This exhibition is a retrospective of my work from 1977 to 2015. It is also the first time that I can see myself from a far perspective. I think the path was very hard. I have to be strong and see what my path will continue to be and how to better myself. In the real life, I have to avoid receiving damages. If I'm damaged, I can't go on. I think in China there are two aspects: until 30 years ago there was reality; but in the past 30 years we have experienced extreme reality. This extreme reality is the result of the unification of capital and political power. The barbaric union makes us feel terrified. Money is the only god. If we don't grab money, we will feel even more

terrified. Having money means getting some material comfort, but, in its heart, each Chinese will still feel depressed and worried because the richness you have managed to grab is not receiving any protection. I know that I have been fighting for 30 years, and I also know that there is no way I can change this government. As an artist, I have the responsibility to express the cruelty of this reality.

China's leaders are attempting to use the country's transition to a market economy and integration into the global economy to advance environmental and social issues, also on an urban level. When linking urban planning to trade, imaginaries of urban progress seemed to be very suitable. But its dimension of sustainability has now started to reveal its cracks, such as the proliferation of "Ghost cities". Where is China's future taking place? Where should it be located?

The real estate sector is a very important motor of economy, especially in China where the land is in full arbitrary control of the government, and therefore there is an augmentation of wealth from the selling of land use rights (rights that are not protected). This way to proceed is very different from what it was developed in China in the past centuries. In the past, cities were very united under a common view about environment, function and social structure. The structure of cities or, more generally, the management of environment and the conflicting power were the result of continuous negotiations among conflicting powers. But recently the development of Chinese cities has been too fast and this has caused incredible destruction to the environment. In legal terms, the land has not been distributed in a equal and fair way, the design of the city and the public space are all a fast and simplified process, all very temporary. There is no tradition. The cities' facilities are not keeping pace: hospitals, schools, parks... These cities are just tools used by the political officials and the real estate developers to spoil resources and make quick money. Now the slogan is "The City is beautiful", but for the people living in the city, I believe it's a painful experience: the air is polluted, traffic is chaotic and long queues form at all times, every corner is overpopulated and overcrowded. All these circumstances show very clearly how the city is not beautiful at all. These huge cities consume an incredible amount of energy, I don't know what their sustainability is. I don't know when the next slogan will spring out, and if it will ask us to go back to the countryside.