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From the shadows of the spectacular city: Zhang Dali's *Dialogue* and counter-spectacle in globalizing Beijing, 1995–2005

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ABSTRACT

This study advances a notion of counter-spectacle in current-day China by examining a graffiti project carried out in Beijing between 1995 and 2005 titled *Dialogue* by the artist Zhang Dali (???). The essay draws attention to the opportunities and limitations for resistance amid urban spectacle and examines them through a detailed case study in an aspiring "world city." The paper argues that a theory of urban counter-spectacle that integrates the role of oppositional practices at the intersection of cultural and spatial change can help to explain the unstable nature of China's contemporary urbanism. More broadly, it expands debates on state-society conflict by demonstrating how urban spaces function as sites of social activism and as alternative fora for contentious politics through the production of meaning in specific spaces.

Introduction

In the latter half of the 1990s, the Chinese artist Zhang Dali (???, b. 1963) earned international notoriety as the creator of a landmark serial graffiti project carried out in Beijing. The project involved spray-painting large profiles of heads on walls throughout the city. His most common tactic was to paint on semi-demolished walls or on walls that had been marked with a Chinese "chai" (?) character – the public signal that the building was slated for demolition. Occasionally, he left signatures beside the images, or "tags," reading "AK-47" and "18K."[1] The images were composed of a single black line tracing the silhouette of an oddly proportioned head. The bulbous shape of the cranium, rounded lips, and prominent chin lent them a cartoonish appearance. Yet their minimalism contrasted with the visibly systematic way in which they were being produced in specific types of spaces and in great numbers (see Fig. 1). The perplexing presence of Zhang's heads in the city's rapidly changing landscape pried its way into the public's perception and ignited intense debates.

Zhang titled his project *Dialogue* (*duihua* – ??) and has explained that it was conceived in response to the dramatic transformation of Beijing's urban spaces at the turn of the millennium. He has said that he intended the graffiti as a provocation aimed at stimulating discussion about the city's dramatic physical and social transformations (Wu, 2000; Woodworth, 2009). "[Urban redevelopment] is actually destroying the city's memory, and in a sense, the memory of its people," Zhang said at the time (Rouse, 2001). His project, he told me, was inspired by a sense of mourning for Beijing's disappearing landscapes and revulsion toward the social and spatial stratification that has characterized the city's post-socialist transformations.[2] Zhang was hardly alone in these sentiments; a sense of loss over the destruction of the city's distinctive traditional urban form was widespread.

Though Beijing's physical transformations to which Zhang was responding were well underway before the onset of market reforms, the pace and scale of change rose markedly in the 1990s as coalitions of developers and city officials worked to see through an agenda to build Beijing into an "international metropolis" redefined by high-design architectural landmarks, widened boulevards, shopping malls, and high-rise residential and office towers (see Wang, 2003; Lu, 2006; Liang, 2014). As a consequence of the intensification of redevelopment activity during the past two decades, Beijing's traditional urban form, featuring imperial landmarks, courtyard homes, and dense, lively neighborhoods, has largely disappeared. One critical approach to Beijing's radical spatial transformations in recent years has been to analyze this process of change through the analytical lens of the "spectacle" (Broudehoux, 2004, 2007, 2010; Shin, 2012, 2014). Drawing on Guy Debord's theory of the "spectacle society," this work has taken the introduction of

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[1] Zhang explained his adoption of the AK-47 pseudonym thusly: "I use AK-47 in my graffiti because it represents violence in each corner of society, written on the face of the people and controlling their thoughts" (Rouse, 2001). His other pseudonym, 18K, he described to me as a reference to what he perceived as rampant materialism in Chinese society.

[2] Email communication with the artist, October 2014.

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Fig. 1. Zhang Dali's heads appear on the demolished interior walls of residences in inner-city Beijing. Photo courtesy of Zhang Dali.

multiple architectural landmarks, such as the National Theater, the CCTV headquarter building, and 2008 Summer Olympic venues, and the Olympic Games themselves as pivotal moments in China's turn to spectacle and an expression of contemporary political economy. These transformations further demonstrate the Chinese state's embrace of signature architecture and mega-events as sources of economic growth and political legitimacy and underscore the hybrid character of China's "socialist market economy." This shift also marks a decisive metamorphosis of spectacle in which corporate power and the authoritarian Party state produce a potent combination with the capacity to deliver enormous spatial reconfigurations against minimal resistance.

Yet, as the studies just mentioned also make clear, the Chinese state's agenda to consolidate power through spectacle is never complete. Instead, spectacles trigger cultural change and resistance to which authorities are forced to respond and, in some cases, accommodate. Architectural historian Anne-Marie Broudehoux (2010) calls this the "productive role" of spectacle in Beijing as a way to account for the different types of contestation and change incurred by the spectacularization of urban landscapes in the city.

This article builds upon this perspective on spectacle in Beijing to ask how might we understand the presence of Zhang's cryptic spray-painted heads throughout the Chinese capital during this period – heads that seem to raise vital questions about the politics of space in a rapidly changing post-socialist city? What is the significance of Zhang's use of graffiti? Why paint on walls at sites of urban ruin? Why paint iconographic heads? And what is significant about Beijing at that particular time? To address such questions, this article analyzes Zhang's project in terms of counter-spectacle to reveal how the artist and the art marked a sustained tactical usage of specific sites to deliver repeated aesthetic-political interventions into the process of urban redevelopment. Through a detailed case study approach to Zhang's graffiti project, I show that *Dialogue* comprised a deliberate and highly visible staging of opposition to Beijing's redevelopment and its underlying urban political economy. Yet the interpretation of Zhang's graffiti presented here avoids ascribing one-sided resistive intentions to the artist and instead highlights the multiple contradictions disclosed by the project. Shedding light on *Dialogue*'s productive instabilities underscores the myriad ways that urban space in Beijing has become a contested arena as well as a medium and site of critique, conflict, and reinterpretation. Through its uses of site, image, and surrounding discourses, the graffiti was part of a vital process of creating and expanding new forms of public expression in China (Bruce, 2010). This investigation also underscores how graffiti takes on specific meanings and functions in the contemporary Chinese urban setting. At stake here is an appreciation of a spatial politics that emerges in the shadows of urban spectacle.

In the space below, I elaborate a conceptual framework of counter-spectacle. I then analyze the artwork in detail through a range of documentary sources and interview data collected through six interviews with the artist conducted in Beijing and via email between 2005 and 2014. Zhang has maintained an extensive archive of documentary materials related to *Dialogue*, and he made this archive available to me for this study.

Debord's spectacle and the counter-spectacle

In his landmark book, *The Society of the Spectacle* (*La société du spectacle*), Guy Debord levels a scathing critique of contemporary society while providing an explanatory framework for capitalism in a media-driven age (1995[1967]). The passionate intensity of Debord's polemic – his intent in the work was, he has said, "to do harm to spectacular society" – has given it a remarkable allure for critical scholars in a wide range of fields ever since it was first published. Indeed, the frequency with which the term "spectacle" has been applied has given rise to a number of fundamental critiques of the theory on the grounds that it has become overused and therefore lost its original explanatory purchase (see, for example Crary, 1989; Mitchell, 2008). Yet, as the editors of this special issue argue, spectacles might also be seen as something other than a hermetic totality – and, indeed, there is reason to read a more flexible view of spectacle in Debord's own writing on the topic. In this spirit, spectacles might also be conceived as moments and spaces of contestation and vital sites of political struggle and meaning making. To develop a conceptualization of spectacle along these lines, the passages below provide a reading of the spectacle and propose the idea of counter-spectacle as an apposite frame through which to regard Zhang Dali's graffiti in Beijing.

At the center of Debord's theory of the spectacle is the increasing importance of images in mediating social relations. Adapting a Marxian perspective, his theory builds upon the idea of the commodity fetish in which the exploitative relations of production under capitalism are masked by the seemingly neutral acts of exchange and consumption. For Debord, the spectacle marks an evolution of the fetish by saturating daily experience with a ceaseless array of seductive and distracting images. Commodity production is replaced by image production as the dominant economic and social activity. In Debord's terms, "The spectacle is *capital* accumulated to point where it becomes image" (1995[1967]: thesis 34, all italics in original). In this manner, the substantive differences between production and consumption are collapsed into a unified experience of collective spectatorship. The result is a profound alienation, societal complacency, and dissolution of "authentic" experience.

So conceived, the spectacle has effectively conquered all aspects of the quotidian. "The spectacle," Debord asserts, "corresponds to the historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life. ... Commodities are *all* that there is to see; the world we see is the world of the commodity" (1995[1967]: thesis 42). This applies also to the urban built environment, which was a persistent focus of Debord's critical work both in his theoretical writings on the spectacle and in his associations with the radical avant-garde collective known as the Situationist International (SI), active from the 1950s to 1970s. Grand events and large-scale urban redevelopment projects, he and his SI collaborators argued, were symptomatic of a far-reaching evolution in late capitalism. Central to this shift is the transformation of material spaces into visually striking projections that divert the public's attention from social problems and aid in the