



# Mengting Zhuo

London, UK

*I am first an audience and then a performance maker. When I'm a creator, I make works that I want to see as an audience: I'd like to see interesting shows of brilliant naughtiness, of energy and rhythm, of text used to transmit unspeakable feeling, of contingent meaning wrapped in careful design.*

*English is not my first language; and in this language, I love playing word games and create an 'alienation effect' for some ideas. I have made shows simply with a slide, a stack of cards, some labels, or an iPad, and I love bringing these simple signs to interact with the audience, a moment in which I get to choreograph all these elements together: gestures, imageries, sound, light, text, space, and time.*

Mengting Zhuo (b. 1990 in Guangzhou, China) is a performance maker based in London. She has received her MA in Performance Making from Goldsmiths, University of London and BA in English Literature. She has made work for theatres, galleries and other spaces, including streets, a bar, and a residential flat. She is a founding member of a loose Chinese artist collective 'Coming Soon'. Parallel to her performance practice, she plays drums and is a translator.



### When, how and why started your art practice?

I have done different kinds of creative practices. I started writing fictions since very young - about 10 years old - and for a long time I wanted to become a writer. (I might still be one - who knows?) When I went to college I started playing in bands, and for some years I wanted to become a musician (which didn't work out). As for performance/theatre making, I directed my first piece in 2011 for a student theatre, and I had the feeling that this is the thing for me. In a live performance, the performer and the audience are both present, every show is different, it is multimedia in nature, it is limitless, and it is always full of changes and accidents. Since then, I started going to see all kinds of performances, being involved in community theatre, and then I took the MA course 'Performance Making' that Goldsmiths, which was an important step in my practice that helped me to bring everything together.

### What does performance mean in contemporary culture?

The term 'performance art' is quite new. An experimental act starting from 60s, it kind

of has the 'contemporiness' in itself. If you mean performance in general, it can date back to the ancient Greek time. As long as there is audience, there is theatre, or performance, or 'spectacle', as used in many European languages. As we gradually change our ways of seeing, 'performance' will constantly update its definition over time.

Due to its nature, 'performance art', or the more contemporary term 'live art', is more difficult to commodify - that probably makes performance different from painting or sculpture - but it is not impossible, at all.

### Do you think of yourself as a conceptual artist?

Interesting question - I'm wondering, can this be paraphrased as 'is your idea the most important thing in your work'? Or, 'do you use your ideas instead of the traditional art-making skills'?

I would say my work is driven by concept, instead of by showing off virtuoso acting skills or so. But strictly speaking, whose work isn't driven by concept, if they're original? I recently saw David Hockney's exhibition at Tate Britain. I think all of his works are very conceptual, reflective and playful. However, he wouldn't say he's a conceptual artist (according to a BBC interview) - he is a painter with interesting ideas.

I am considerably influenced by linguistics, magic realism and formalism, which might inevitably make my work conceptually inclined. However, when referring to myself, I prefer 'performance maker', the most neutral and comprehensive term I've come across.

### What do you like/dislike about the art world?

The timeless world of art is what makes me feel alive.

The art world in our time, is a well-constructed system, supported by institutions, critics, buyers, funders, and art-manufacturers. The idea of being trapped in this system makes me reluctant to think further.

### How would you describe the art scene in your area? Is this possible to compare somehow China and UK?

London is great, that's why I'm still bearing with its cost of living! However, in terms of the performance scene, sometimes I feel it lacks its own voice and becomes quite predictable. I might move to a continental European city in a few years.

Comparing to the UK, China is 'developing', so as its art scene. On one hand, the practitioners are still catching up with the latest critical theories; on the other hand, I think people are a bit unsure about their own voice and convention within the international context.

I guess over years, the scenes in two countries will become more and more similar, because we are in the same art world system after all.

### Describe a real-life situation that inspired you?

My piece 'Local Time' draws inspiration from my long-haul flight experience, when I need to set my watch to a new local time. I think the gesture of time-setting is a powerful and interesting one, and I presented it in my piece.

Actually, in most cases, my mind floats a lot, especially when I'm seeing an exhibition or watching a performance (I feel a bit guilty saying this). A lot of my random ideas come from random moments without actual relevance.

### What is your dream project?

To work with an 'unadaptable' book, and to have all kinds of resources available - right site, right performers, etc.

### Name three artists you'd like to be compared to.

Sun Xiaoxing. He's a young Chinese theatre artist of my generation, and a friend of mine. Not many practitioners in China can really think out of the box like him.

Rotozaza, live artist duo based in the UK. In fact my first encounter with their 'automatic theatre' was in Beijing. I feel I will meet them in the future and have a lot of thoughts to share.

I struggle for the third one. There are so many artists I admire but I might never be compared to them. Let me say Jorge Luis Borges for now.







[www.zhuomengting.com](http://www.zhuomengting.com)