



**Age of  
Artists**

Interview

**Dai Chenlian**

**Beijing, 13.04.17**



The Interview was conducted by Benjamin Stromberg the 13/04/2017 in Beijing (Age of Artists, AoA).

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## Introduction

Dai Chenlian lives in Beijing and he was born 1982 in the Shaoxing Zhejiang Province, China. He graduated at the China Academy of Fine Art and among Chinese contemporary artists he is a pioneer in combining theatrical concepts with video art. By integrating a comprehensive usage of these artistic methods into his own works, he makes himself a tech-ruled world that reflects the media as a way of high-end promotion and public influence. Dai's most representative work is his theatrical series of shadow play animation installation. On a set "stage", couples of paper and leather puppets are simulated into storytelling scenes and filmed as animation video. Dai puts ordinary stories into his work like small potatoes and news incidents to be his narration and imagination towards today's world. His works depict, at an era of social transformation, the sufferings that the ordinary people undertake and the changes they have been through. Hence, the neglected emotions and incidents are discovered from the guise of so-called correct behaviours.

## Interview

Aoa: How did you become an artist?

Dai Chenlian: At the second year in my college I just thought I am an artist.

AoA: Why?

Dai Chenlian: Art gave me a reason to live. It exists for me to express something. Through art I found my way to live happily. In that time I just thought I have to do this now.

AoA: How old were you then?

Dai Chenlian: I was 23 years old.

AoA: Were you already experienced in art or did you feel having a talent for it?

Dai Chenlian: I have a major in oil painting and skills in painting. But I felt more sensitive to performances. I think because performances were more far away from what you learned in school. And talking about talent: I think first of all you have to be sensitive and second you have to work hard.

AoA: How do you get your ideas for your works?

Dai Chenlian: My inspirations come from very daily and regular things in life. My ideas come from life.

AoA: How do you get started then?

Dai Chenlian: All my works focus on certain people. First I do is to connect all the information about these people, like educational information or even the values of love. I need to know as much as I can about them.

AoA: Do you already know how your work in the end will look like in that moment?

Dai Chenlian: I don't know how the work will be like at the final stage. Rather I have a way or system that I follow. It is like a road that gives me a direction, time and declines my movements in the space. For all my work there are two core principles: First the system that leads my steps and second my materials and all the information I have been collecting. I will find a way to combine these things and after that I will know how it will be like.

AoA: And what happens if you fail during this process?

Dai Chenlian: I will think and wait. And finally I will figure it out.

AoA: Let us talk again about the system that you were talking about. If you conceptualize performances, do you have certain rules that you follow in each work?

Dai Chenlian: Yes, I do have some fundamental rules: I take human and objects as objects. For example in a performance there are two people holding some objects. And then I set the roles between them: The left person has to go the right and the right person has to go the left. After that the two people have to compete with each other. As people or animals they have to change their roles then. So I set the roles for them but they will change it through their own awareness or consciousness. They decide when the change will start but I decide how the change should happen. I am a roost in this game.

And I always use the way of mistakes. My attempt is to use something wrong. For example I always put some nasted or ugly movements into my works.

AoA: So you put a frame but in that frame lots of things can change?

Dai Chenlian: Exactly.

AoA: How important is routine to you?

Dai Chenlian: It is really important. I mean it is very, very important.

AoA: How do you keep a balance between routine and creativity?

Dai Chenlian: I always use the powers of nature to change the routines like the elements. Usually I use water or fire. I want the routine to change or to break.

AoA: So the breaking point of the routine is where creativity emerges?

Dai Chenlian: Yes.

AoA: This means that creativity and routine can actually be the same thing?

Dai Chenlian: Yes, I think it is the same system.

AoA: What do you think about your position as a leader when you conceptualize a performance?

Dai Chenlian: I think a good artist is an artist who can also control his work. And I think my position is actually like being an editor. I have lots of materials and I have to choose them or to pick them or to combine them, just like an editor. This is my job.

AoA: When do you know that a work is finished?

Dai Chenlian: I have two standards for my process and at what time it will stop. The first standard is the organisations like for example a gallery. They tell me the performance should be around half an hour long, so there is a point where I have to stop. And the second

standard is personal. I know it is finished when it can help someone else. If someone else gains something from the project there is a stopping point. And I will set a time for it. Like a pot of water will boil it will come to its end.

AoA: It is interesting that you also consider when it helps other people. So, how important is feedback for you?

Dai Chenlian: I think the attitude of the audience is very important. It has two functions: The first function is that the opinions of the audience give me new ideas of the next works. And another function is that the audience is also part of the work. When they give back their feelings or views is this the final stage of my work. I think the audience is my teacher.

AoA: How do you feel after finishing a work and presenting it to other people?

Dai Chenlian: I think my final emotion is a mixture between sorrow and happiness.

AoA: And what if the reputation will be even bad?

Dai Chenlian: I think bad comments from other people are really a good thing. In contrary I think if everybody would love my work this is a bad sign. The artist should not always stay in the rules of safety. The questions should be questioned. Artists shouldn't be safe, there should always be a voice against them.

AoA: Do you think that barriers help you to create your work or do you think you could work better with more support?

Dai Chenlian: I think in all history and in every country there are always times between two sides that are not stable. And this is exactly the right time for a good artist to emerge. Maybe the government ban them or will be taken down by others. But actually art doesn't tell something about politics in the first way. Whether you are an artist in a good or in a bad environment is not important to me. Both of them can have good works.

AoA: You do paintings, performances, installations and videos. Is there any difference to let it go to the audience?

Dai Chenlian: There is a big difference if you do a painting or if you perform just in front of an audience. There are different feelings. I think of a performance like more straight. I am facing the people and people are facing the people. It is also a raise out of the thinking. During the painting you have a long and independent time in a personal space. You think and keep thinking about the work. That is kind of calm feelings. But when you come to the public it is kind of a qualification of my thoughts. I will be more excited and there will be more hormones circulating through my body.

AoA: What do you think about censorship? I am not referring just to the Chinese Government, but rather generally interested if you think there are some things which should be clearly forbidden or if an artist should be able to do anything to reach his objective.

Zhang Heming (Translator): One thing I should mention to you is the story of Zhu Li. He ate his own baby when it was five months old and the embryo was not even complete. It was a performance. BBC also reported this. But actually when you see him talking or giving interviews he is a rational person. So that is strange. He does stuff like this, probably against morals.

Dai Chenlian: I think problems of moral should be separated from art. I don't think what Zhu Li did is the right thing but in art I think everything should be realised. I am from the same city like Zhu Li, I don't like him personally. And I think his painting is not painted by himself, but from his assistant (everyone laughing).

AoA: This is another interesting topic. What do you think about copying or stealing? Do you think there can be something purely new?

Zhang Heming (Translator): This is a question that used to bother me a long time. When I was young I really didn't like stealing. I didn't like students using the other people answers during exams. I even tried to stop them from this. But coming to art I think there are lots of things like copying or stealing. So what is the exact standard for this? In contemporary arts it can be normal to use images of the renaissance, right? And it's okay. Everyone is standing on the shoulders of giants.

Dai Chenlian: I have a similar opinion. We all should do something new, but to reach this new point we need the material from other people and you reuse it. This is okay. Whether a work is 100 percent stolen or my own thing, you can tell! Actually you can tell it.

As global persons and with the internet everyone shares thoughts and information. It is hard to avoid this and probably impossible to create the pure new. But you have to come up with a standard for yourself. You cannot just steal something, you have to renew it.

AoA: How important is Copyright to you?

Dai Chenlian: I am famous (everyone laughing). I mean I'm not that famous, but if something of me is circulating in the internet and another one uses my work it doesn't have a future because everybody will know it. So for me personally it doesn't really matter.

AoA: Let us go to another topic. What do you think about time as a conception? How do you feel about past, present and future during your process but also in general?

Dai Chenlian: We as human being always try to match time. It is always the primer force why we start doing something. Why would you invent an airplane? We want to reduce the distance and to save time. Or take the dream of a time machine: We want to go through this door and to reach that place. To me the Universe or the Space is like a paper or surface. If you kink this paper the distance between my place and the future will become very short. It is a big change.

AoA: Would you say that you as an artist are more connected to the future?

Dai Chenlian: I think it is the job of science to realise this kind of ideas. And the artist's job is to imagine and to image something.

What science and art have in common is that they both do it in an experimental way. The whole history of human or even every conception of our societies is imagined by human. Actually the society doesn't exist on matter. And we can imagine what future looks like and this is always imagined from now. It is the artist's job do these imaginations and the artist will always stand with the future.

AoA: What could society and especially business learn from art?

Zhang Heming (Translator): I talked about this question with a friend two weeks ago. I think economy is actually like a power of the businessmen. They know how to control the market. They just use their powers. But what is the power of art? Does art have a power? I think the strengths of the art come from a higher place and human cannot control it. But actually we can feel it exists.

Dai Chenlian: Business can learn creativity from art. Art always breaks itself and goes to the future, to the supposed next stage. But business is sometimes satisfied with its situation. Economy should create more ways or systems to overcome the separation of the rich and the poor people. They have to create stabile systems if they want to make good instead of keep standing at the same point.

Zhang Heming (Translator): I want to add something: Artists have always to imagine things as we said before. And to say maybe something bad about art - most of the works don't have a real function. Some do, but most of the works are futile. So it's easy for artists to image because I don't need to know how you make it. I just paint it. This might inspire the inventors or scientists of the fu-

ture but for now it's kind of useless. When I come into the process of creating or just improving a product it becomes really hard. Even the colours and materials can be very expensive. So economy cannot go as far as art.

AoA: Could you imagine a society that works in an artistic way?

Dai Chenlian: I think the art is actually changing the world. Because every product in our life got more and more good looking and makes you feel good. I cannot imagine exactly but in the future people might enjoy it more to use things and feel more comfortable about it. So I think art is already changing the world and it will change the world further in the future.

Zhang Heming (Translator): As for me the core of art is creativity. As Beuys said famously everyone is an artist. I don't think that everyone should be an artist but I do think that everyone should be creative in his work. This is my personal dream. I think the art has to change the people and their way to think. As soon as you try something new in your work you will be happier. So why people get depressed? Because they don't think it's their job. They just feel wasting energy to earn some money. That's a big problem. But if everyone would focus on their works and take it seriously the world changed.

AoA: Thank you both for the interesting talk and the tasty Chinese black tea!