

“Can we go to Long Pig? They have toys.” - Transmetropolitan

A document in advance: a few months after the publication of this text, Loo Zihan’s *Cane* is set to occur. Although it was first realized some months ago in Chicago, situating it in Singapore is of particular note, adding layers of associations and references to an act which, in simple terms, could be described as a reenactment of Josef Ng’s *Brother Cane*, the public reaction to which resulted in a ten-year ban on public funding for performance art in Singapore.

Beyond its status as reenactment, *Cane* could also be said to resemble a form of document-engaged performance I described in my essay for *Future of Imagination 5*.¹ Built atop an eyewitness account by Ray Langenbach, incorporating visual records and other oral documents, *Cane* may well embody a tipping point between performance and its document(s), or vice versa. In other words, if the overall accumulation and circulation of documents relating to *Brother Cane*, in all of their disparate, branching threads, constitute mycelia, *Cane* would then be a sporocarp – a fruiting body, which emerges for the dispersal of informational and performative spores.

Opinions, of course, are divided. Some might allege that this amounts to no more than cynical reappropriation, hijacking an established, even iconic work for the sake of self-aggrandizement. Still others might cite Marx’s comment concerning the repetition of history² – if Ng’s realization precipitated tragedy, would Loo’s then amount to farce? Or would the opposite occur, with Loo’s work highlighting the significance of the circulation of documents (up until, one assumes, the fateful document that probably didn’t read, “no more tax money for dirty yuck. Rgds G.Y.”) in establishing the iconicity of Ng’s performance?³

Apart from the issues which entangle *Cane* specifically, we may also find that – in the present time, some decades after

the emergence of performance art – the inter-territorial zones at the limits of performance find themselves populated by an increasing profusion of chimeras and other strange fauna. Not quite a Cambrian explosion, perhaps, but nonetheless diverse. One of these rests at the tipping point of the performance and its subsequent documents, or vice versa, which we may see in *Cane*. Another inhabitant, referred to by Claire Bishop as “outsourced”,⁴ or delegated performance, would count amongst its exponents Santiago Sierra and Elmgreen & Dragset,⁵ in which the fleshly presence at the apparent performance site is found in individuals engaged, whether by financial or other inducements, to undertake actions as directed by the artist.

In discussing the more general aspects of these far and distant territories of performance, I do not think it would be unreasonable to posit some degree of correlation between developments in technology and socio-economic organization, in relation to changes in artistic theory and practice.

For instance, it is perhaps not by mere chance alone that the emergence and rise of performance art, with its fixation on the body as the locus of expression, coincided with such socio-political and financial involutions as the end of the Bretton Woods system, the rise of economic deregulation, as well as the emergence of digitally augmented society through the increasing ubiquity of computers, satellite telecommunications, and the birth of the Internet itself – changes which saw concentrations of power achieve orbital velocity even as they (and their constituent entities) became diffuse and distributed. In the face of such societal discorporation, the reaffirmation of the embodied real, though reactive, would have remained coherent.

Thus – on one hand, the period of time from the origins of performance art to the present day, during which we may note an increase in the critical and popular acceptance of performance art – with a particularly notable instance of recent

institutional imprimatur in Marina Abramovic's *The Artist is Present* at New York's Museum of Modern Art, which had hopeful visitors camping out for nights on end for a chance to enter the presence and be shriven.

On the other hand, covering a similar time period, we may chart the asymptotic rise of globalization and its appurtenances. For instance, globalized finance now marks (or mars) the world with such hyper-kinetic hijinks as the innocuously named high-frequency trading (which have been described as algorithmic terrorism), as well as such dislocative oddities as Special Economic Zones. In the same period of time, personal computers and internet access have become increasingly ubiquitous, while transgenic organisms, once objects of academic study, are now firmly entrenched in the global agricultural infrastructure.

While, of course, correlation does not necessarily imply causation, it does waggle its eyebrows rather suggestively, and it behooves us to explore possible links between the upward trend in acceptance of performance art's embodied expressivity with upward trends in social, political, and technological diffusion, dislocation and disembodiment.

Such trends lend credence to the notion that the past few decades of, as Bojana Kunst framed it, “an obsessive romance with self and the body”⁶, were in truth a palliative blind – that these objects of desire became desirable for the simple reason that they had passed beyond our reach. In much the same way that recent research in dopamine addiction suggests that it is the anticipation of dopamine, and not dopamine itself, which is sought, we may remain in indefinite anticipation of the embodied self – a dizzying paroxysm in parallel to the staggering madness of the present economic condition.

To extend the thought further, we might also consider the possibility that such a palliative blind conceals not the loss of the body through the machinations of capital (as enacted by disembodied, continent-spanning corporations, which have

been characterized as both the dominant life-forms of the present time, as well as being immortal, amoral sociopaths), but its own (unconscious or not) collusion in this dissolution.

If we are then facing (or have been facing all along) the irretrievable loss of the body and self, works of performance art which took them as points of origin might be reconsidered in terms of mourning, longing, or farce. However, in a 2009 TED talk, activist and athlete Aimee Mullins⁷, in relation to changing perceptions of disability and prosthesis, proclaimed that the focus was shifting from the overcoming of deficiency to the augmentation of potential. If the body and self, as conceptual grounds for aesthetic articulation, are lacking, how then could they be augmented – what conceptual prostheses could be supplied?

In relation to this question, it is worth noting that the human body – as both the reification of individuality and the common ground of experience across our species – may soon be (or already is) obsolete on those very terms. Donna Haraway's 1985 cyborg manifesto suggested that the cyborgization of our species has already taken place – that each of us, in varying degrees and directions, are already amalgamations of mechanism and organism.⁸

The cyborg according to Haraway is the product of lived social relations, an ambiguous creature which disregards collective origins and organic wholes – partial, ironic, intimate and perverse. As the output of a social framework that has been mechanized, digitized and mediatized in advance, we find these qualities internalized within ourselves. For instance, the Taylorist division of labor which helped birth the epoch of mass production might well find itself reflected in the possibility of internalized division of identities – poly-pseudonymity – in response to the aggressive transparency of social media software.

Though material cyborgization is far less apparent, we may consider our increasing integration with technology in relation

to new and emerging technologies. The Internet now serves as collectivized prosthesis of memory and communication, while the advent of direct neural interfaces and cybernetic limbs suggest the possibility of the infinite editability (and thus differentiation) of the body. Although technologies for the enhancement of our bodies have long existed, they pale in comparison to recent, current, and projected capacities.

Within the flesh itself, we observe once again the advent of editability and the transgression of boundaries, with active research in cross-species organ transplantation and the J. Craig Venter Institute's recent claims of having developed the first synthetic life form.⁹ Furthermore, as equipment costs fall and technical information spreads, it seems reasonable to expect experimentation beyond the novelty of glowing rodents. Once the abstracted preserve of hypothetically faceless men in white coats (and, by extension, entrenched institutions beholden to corporate and governmental requirements), genetic experimentation is now increasingly accessible, a situation summed up by OpenPCR's rallying cry – DNA is DIY.¹⁰

Returning once more to the specific instance of *Cane*, we may of course note that a body is still very much involved – an artist's body, no less! Fixating on that shibboleth, however, may well elide the potential for exploring performativity in the creation, editing, and circulation of data across informational networks and archives. We could, indeed, conceive of performative bodies not so much in terms of supposed fleshly immediacy and authenticity, but (to invert the earlier, earthier metaphor) fragmented, performative, informational avatars – gestural, affective user interfaces, even.

In the context of shifting normals in the technological and social spheres – fleets of Theseus, in constant, churning states of becoming – it seems less than helpful for the spheres of artistic activity to possess key anchors and (however blurred and uncertain) boundaries of genre and medium. Within such complex, evolving situation, artistic classification might do well to take a leaf from biological taxonomy.

Where once the ponderous kingdoms of Linnaeus reigned, classifying life forms on the basis of apparent structural similarities (One stamen? Line A, please. Two? Line B), current techniques of biological systematics include cladistics, in which groups are defined by shared evolutionary history of given characteristics, and molecular phylogenetics, which decodes genetic legacies – as datasets grow ever larger and more complex, so too do our techniques of analysis.

Applying this coarse-to-fine grain transition to artistic classification, then, might take the form of data-informed interrogations of aesthetic practices, in which sliding scale(s) of performativity might well supplant the blocky-yet-contentious general field of performance art – and likewise for the numerous fields of art, with the general upshot of migrating from definitional, territorial disputes, to a more diverse, complex field of discussion.

Editors' Note: This article was published in November 2011 as part of Future of Imagination 7, International Performance Art Event catalogue. It is reproduced here with the kind permission of the organizers.

NOTES

- 1 Bruce Quek, "Document & Performance or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Lens" in *Future of Imagination 5* (Singapore: FOI 5, 2008), pp. 20 – 28.
- 2 Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York, 1852). Project Gutenberg, June 2006. <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1346/1346-h/1346-h.htm>>
- 3 George Yeo was Minister for Information and the Arts at the time of the *Brother Cane* controversy.
- 4 Claire Bishop, "Outsourcing Authenticity? Delegated Performance in Contemporary Art," in *Double Agent*, eds. Claire Bishop and Sylvia Tramontana (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 2008), pp. 111 – 14.
- 5 See Santiago Sierra, "Group of People Facing the Wall and Person Facing into a Corner" Lisson Gallery, London, October 2002, and Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset, "Reg(u)arding the Guards." Bergen Kunsthall, 2005.
- 6 Bojana Kunst, "Strategies of Subjectivity in Contemporary Performance Art," in *Maska*, Performance Territories (2002, Year XVII), no. 74 – 75.
- 7 Aimee Mullins, "Prosthetic Aesthetics: It's Not Fair Having 12 Pairs of Legs" (February 2009) Video file retrieved from: <http://www.ted.com/talks/aimee_mullins_prosthetic_aesthetics.html>
- 8 Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 149 – 52.
- 9 Daniel G. Gibson *et al*, "Creation of a Bacterial Cell Controlled by a Chemically Synthesized Genome", *Science*, vol. 329, no. 5987 (2 July, 2010), pp. 52 – 56. Published online 20 May 2010. Retrieved from: <<http://www.sciencemag.org/content/329/5987/52.full?sid=89f5641b-d168-43c5-873e-a7546acab376>>
- 10 Tito Jankowski, "DNA is now DIY: OpenPCR ships worldwide." *OpenPCR*. 6 Jul 2011. <<http://openpcr.org/2011/07/dna-is-now-diy-openpcr-ships-worldwide/>>