

Body

There are various sorts of bodies here: nude bodies, soiled bodies, individual and collective bodies, bodies of work.

The equivalent of the proverbial money shot occurs in *Cane* (2012) when Loo Zihan, clad only in his underwear – to which he has successively stripped down, over the course of the performance, from an all-white ensemble and a black dressing gown – finally discards even that last shred of modesty. He removes his briefs, and, for about forty seconds, stands stark naked in the center of a ring of red paint splashes, slowly turning around so as to afford every member of the audience a clear view of his privates, the triangle of skin above his genitals revealed to be smooth, hairless, as clean-shaven as his depilated pate.¹

Loo’s full frontal nudity marks the latest moment in a trajectory of corporeal confessionality. The confessing body is materialized by more than the mere fact of nakedness: it is uncomfortably, obsessively exposed; it confides, displays and psychologizes its own secrets; it is admission, accusation and autobiography, an act of self-interrogation and self-flagellation at one and the same time. As, say, in Anne Sexton’s poems of somatic immediacy – her masturbating wife, for instance (“I am spread out ... My little plum is what you said. At night, alone, I marry the bed.”), or coital dissection (“Whereas last night the cock knew its way home, as stiff as a hammer ... Today it is tender, a small bird, as soft as a baby’s hand.”)² – uncovered flesh stands in for divulged confidence. In this slippage, the physical, *in puris naturalibus*, betokens the personal, *sub rosa*. Loo’s reiterated gestures of bodily revelation, compulsively enacted at various junctures across his oeuvre, conflate the tropes of the undressed soma and the

excavated self, offering up corporeal disclosure as an analogue of narrated subjectivity. The artist's body, laid bare in all its obscured dimensions, operates as a nexus of intersecting strands: of material and social taboos, trauma and amnesia, abjection and repressed histories.

Let's backtrack a little: *Taman Negara* marks a particularly cogent instance of this confessional bent. Staged in 2011 as part of the annual *Singapore Survey* show,³ the piece, notoriously, involved public urination. For several hours, Loo moved between two pillars, alternately standing stock-still and drinking from a number of Chinese chamber pots filled with water; in the midst of the performance, when the need arose, he simply wet himself, with puddles of clear-colored pee slowly collecting in his wake on the floor of the gallery. Pictures taken during a childhood vacation to Malaysia were displayed on one pillar, and on the other was mounted a television screen playing footage of these photographs, over which was superimposed visual effects of running water; also included was an audio recording. The performance, according to Loo, was rooted in the memory of that eventful trip, one colored by shame and silence in his recollection:

I traveled to Taman Negara, the national park of Malaysia in 1994 at the age of 11 with my Mother on a camping trip. While descending a mountain track, I decided to run ahead, [and] somewhere along the way I took the wrong fork in the road and ended up deep in the jungle. This was my first experience being displaced from civilization, I had no conception of how should one behave in such a situation. My bladder was bursting and I didn't know what to do. I ended up wetting myself. When I eventually found my way back to the camp, my mother was looking all over for me. There was a wet patch running down my shorts. We never spoke about the incident. I asked my mother in preparation for the exhibition if she remembered this incident, she claimed that she was not aware.⁴

The piece is, on the one hand, an aesthetic exorcism, a working-out of adolescent trauma via the vehicle of the performative. The physical demands were voluntarily rigorous: Loo spent as many as three hours simply walking back and forth, remaining stationary, and drinking liberal amounts of fluids – the result of which was a protracted case of water intoxication.⁵ These corporeal ordeals, perhaps not unlike that of Catholic flagellants in the Middle Ages, their self-mortification executed as public penance, represent a redemption of psychological proportions carried out in the somatic register, the absolution of personal complexes through the open, ritualistic chastening of flesh.

No less significant, though, is the interposition of bodily waste in a landscape clearly demarcated by notions of public hygiene. Anthropology provides us with an explanation for considering dirt – and other unclean substances – as “matter out of place”: “It implies two conditions: a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order. Dirt then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements.”⁶ Pollution here is less an issue of essence, but rather one of trespass, of violated boundaries. The conflict between the mutually constitutive realms of the pure and the impure, between cleanliness and contamination, entails the banishment of “inappropriate elements” to a sphere beyond the acceptable – a system that thus also delineates the parameters of the acceptable. Loo's transgression of those borders signals a disruption of the presentable, culturally consumable body, i.e. *sans* traces of messy, unhygienic excreta. In *Taman Negara*, the act of disclosure is twofold: the ceremonially soiled body (an admission of its less salubrious functions that constitute the ‘outside’, or the realm of abjection, to corporeal orthodoxy) dovetails with the admission of a secret childhood shame (the episode reimaged in excruciating, ritualized form), a collapse of biological necessity and psychic expiation.

The gesture of confession, in *Cane*, is imbricated in several layers of intertextuality. The performance is an interpretation of Josef Ng's *Brother Cane* (1993/94), based on an account by artist and scholar Ray Langenbach; various textual sources, including Langenbach's, are recited aloud to the audience; there is footage of an earlier enactment of *Cane* in Chicago, as is a real-time recording of the present performance while it happens; a rarely-seen video clip of Ng's original rendition is also incorporated into the piece. Loo's reconstruction, in its explicitly mediated character, is overdetermined, enmeshed in a web of descriptions, deferrals, interventions, retroprojections. He notes: "... presenting all these accounts is a way of emphasizing the fragmented nature of memory, the constant repetition drowning out the original piece ... A reminder that there is no single definitive representation of *Brother Cane* that will do it justice, and it is not the intention of my piece to do so."⁷ *Cane*, in other words, deliberately locates itself within a matrix of interconnected narratives; even its points of departure are premised on a preordained script, contrived from a variety of materials and sedulously cited. Crucially, the climactic moment of Loo's genital exposure evinces a calculated deviation from its counterpart in *Brother Cane*. According to Langenbach, the climax of the earlier performance occurred as such:

Ng said, "I have heard that clipping hair can be a form of silent protest" (not verbatim quote), and walked to the far end of the gallery space. Facing the wall with his back to the audience, he then lowered his briefs just below the top of his buttocks and carried out an action I could not see. He returned to the performance space and placed a small amount of hair on the centre tile At no time did Josef Ng expose his genitals to the audience. He carefully faced the back wall of the performance space ... No one actually observed him cut his pubic hair. The audience only became aware of what appeared to be cut hair when Ng placed it on a plate before us.⁸

The video clip – which was also shot by Langenbach – bears out this verdict.⁹ The originary moment is partially obscured: the only source of illumination emanates from the rear of the outdoor space, which is otherwise shrouded in gloom. (Ng performed his piece shortly past midnight on January 1, 1994.) It ekes out a sliver of light through the shadows, in which the performer's figure may be discerned. Having destroyed cubes of soybean curd and bags of red dye with a rattan cane, Ng slips out of the bathrobe he is wearing and, clad only in a pair of black briefs, strides purposefully to a white-tiled wall some distance behind him. There, with his back to the audience and his underwear pulled down, he appears to perform certain gesticulations in the area around his crotch, their exact nature hidden. For a few seconds, when the camera zooms in on Ng's bare bottom in an attempt to decipher the goings-on, even the meager source of light is cut off, and the entire *mise-en-scène* is plunged into near total darkness.

What is at stake is not, of course, the actual performance of *Brother Cane* itself, distanced from us now by almost two decades. Rather, as Loo asserts, it is the "fragmented ... memory" of the piece that concerns him, the numerous documents which structure our access to the prototype, and which provide the basis of (future) contestation. Watching the recording of Ng's performance is to witness ontological ghostliness at work; the originary event is always already deferred, and contemporary audiences, withdrawn from experiential privilege, are reduced to watching the camera watching the performer, whose body becomes little more than a ghost in the machine. And, in the case of the video capturing Loo's reenactment, in which Langenbach's recording is embedded, we are set at yet another remove – obliged to contemplate a vestige of a trace of a happening. The phenomenon of obscurity, then, is doubled: in its original iteration, *Brother Cane* was discharged in a milieu where visibility – and thus comprehension – is rendered contingent,

and Langenbach's recording of the performance further determines our only means of ocular approach *post hoc*, the frame of his camera establishing the boundaries of permissible vision-knowledge.¹⁰ Put another way, not only was the authentic moment one that failed to vindicate the attendant discourse (the furor over Ng's pube-snipping stunt, which, as it turns out, was barely discernable during the performance), but the sole visual transcript of the event overlays that particular occlusion with its own (the close-up of Ng's buttocks captured on screen under conditions of poor light and even pitch-blackness). Here, both cognition and sight are virtually, effectively gainsaid.

Juxtaposed against this scenario, in a temporal and spatial continuity, is the bodily disclosure of *Cane's* climax. Contra the limited accessibility of Ng's denouement, as it has been bequeathed to us, Loo's entire performance was conducted in the glare of the spotlight, metaphorically and literally. The lead-up to *Cane* was met with intense media and public attention. Some six months prior to the fact, a front-page article in the *Life!* section of *The Straits Times* featured an image of Ng with uncovered bottom, presumably in the infamous act of trimming his pubic area, and asked: "Remember this?" A few days before the performance, another piece in the same publication queried: "Is it art-making? Or is it a publicity stunt?" It went on to quote a local playwright: "I think what Zihan is doing is not merely a re-enactment, but a neutering of the work for consumption by a new generation of audience ..." A reader's letter declared in response: "Cutting pubic hair again? What is it trying to show? There is absolutely no meaning in performing such an act. It is so silly, weird and crude."¹¹ As if transposing the effect of the public's gaze, its unrelenting scrutiny, into the realm of the sensorial, *Cane* was performed under the vividly bright lights of the Substation Theatre, the site of the staging flushed in a tract of effulgence that left little to the imagination – a fact well attested to by the video recording. As the antithesis to the finite, shrouded view of Josef Ng's performance – or Langenbach's rehearsal thereof

– Loo's reenactment extends the trope of visual transparency, instituting a series of dichotomies: the dimness of an outdoor arena vs. the clarity of the interior space; the purported act of hair-snipping in *Brother Cane* vs. the already shaven crotch in *Cane*; Ng's interruption of the audience's gaze, his back turned to them at the culmination of his "protest", vs. the revelation of Loo's genitalia unabashedly exhibited to the watching crowd, the performer's body swiveling around for maximum exposure, Loo observing the spectators while they survey his nude form, the mutual lines of regard, in fact, writ large on the screen behind them – almost, seemingly, for *our* benefit.

May we be allowed to read Loo's gesture, in all its purposive divergences, as a confession? What exactly, though, would he be confessing to? If the abject body of *Taman Negara*, for one, reifies through its prescribed self-pollution the desire for psychological penance, what does the naked form in *Cane* suggest? Could semantic substance be encountered in the slippage between the individual soma and the corporate corpus – extrapolated from the one, germane to the other? After all, the leap from the singular body to the body politic is but a synecdochical shift, albeit one of socio-cultural import: "Just as it is true that everything symbolises the body, so it is equally true ... that the body symbolises everything else." More critically, "the body is a model which can stand for any bounded system ... The body is a complex structure. The functions of its different parts and their relation afford a source of symbols for other complex structures."¹² If human and societal anatomies are homologous, what does the fact of Loo's denuded corporeal complex – enacted in Singapore, in the year 2012 – signify about its particular historical and cultural moment, or the body politic as it is generated by the sum total of its constituent bodies at this specific juncture?¹³

Bodies

Not too long ago, sometime in early 2009, a young couple takes a stroll around the popular Holland Village neighborhood in nothing but their birthday suits and flip-flops. The following year, a man walks into a MacDonald's restaurant in the wee hours of the morning, *au naturel*, to purchase a cup of coffee. Hot on his heels, a middle-aged woman disrobes at a bus stop and boards a bus, and, shortly after that, at the Art Stage Singapore fair, Hyderabad artist T. Venkanna poses for pictures before a Frida Kahlo painting – in the buff. In 2010, *The Straits Times* reported: "Police received 166 reports of indecent exposure last year [2009], up from 146 in 2008 and 136 in 2007. And 2010 is set to be a record-breaking year. In the six months to June, there were 105 cases - one every other day."¹⁴ This rash of exposed bodies, including Loo's, are nothing if not disruptive, deviant. They are insistently exhibitionist, as if their normally concealed aspects, the appared areas and privy functions, ached to be free of some mass delusion of propriety, some universal stricture of repression – as if, in the act of physical revelation, psychical catharsis stood a chance. To return to the idea of the collective body, then, the mechanism of repression is clear enough. Cultural taboos forbidding public nudity are ubiquitous in the industrialized, civilized world; in Singapore, the legal interdict against what is termed 'indecent exposure' is well-known:

Any person who appears nude (a) in a public place; or (b) in a private place and is exposed to public view, shall be guilty of an offence and shall be liable on conviction to a fine not exceeding \$2,000 or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 3 months or to both. (2) For the purpose of this section, the reference to a person appearing nude includes a person who is clad in such a manner as to offend against public decency or order.¹⁵

The body politic is thus enjoined, by the threat of punitive force, to keep its clothes on; the aggregate body of the citizenry performs its obligations by emerging appropriately clothed.

Failure to comply constitutes a denial of those legal and social frameworks that regulate membership in the corporate body, which confers and, consequently, sanctions forms of permissible selfhood. Judith Butler provides us with a theory of subjectivity. According to the Butlerian paradigm, the subject is materialized only through a citational accumulation that is not a singular act, but requires instead "reiteration of a norm or set of norms"¹⁶ to function as the 'citing' of power – as the bringing into being of the "I". Of interest are the critical elements involved: on the one hand, the processual nature of the performance through which the subject comes into being, stabilizing over time to realize the effect of a unitary entity; and, on the other, the repeated performances of this subjectivity by which it is brought into line with hegemonic discourses, or becomes cognizable as the 'self'. In other words, selfhood is not a prior quantity, but is always derived from the compulsion to repeat normative standards, thus agreeing with a pre-determined modality that confers on it the privilege of existence. She channels Derrida's writings on the efficacy of the signature: "Could a performative utterance succeed if its formulation did not repeat a "coded" or iterable utterance, or ... if the formula I pronounce in order to open a meeting, launch a ship or a marriage were not identifiable as conforming with an iterable model, if it were not then identifiable in some way as a "citation?"¹⁷ The act of repetition, then, is that which allows the self to be identified as such, a (re)citation of power that constitutes the legitimacy of a subject.

The prescriptions of the law governing nudity, in this case, inaugurate one channel through which the citizen-subject is constructed: the compliant, clothes-wearing individual. However, the power cited here – the power of legislation, of enforcement – is not simply ascribed to political ascendancy, but is inscribed by the collective. The reach of the statute is telling: "the reference to a person appearing nude includes a person who is clad in such a manner *as to offend against public decency or order.*" (Emphasis mine.) The standards of decency here are not simply those of the law, but that of the communal body. The individual who veils his/her nudity in

public does so not only to avoid the wrath of the state, but, in assuming those norms upheld by the body politic as a whole, materializes his/her integral viability to the mass. It is no coincidence, perhaps, that the phenomenon of public nudity is commonly ascribed to other, underlying forms of perversion. A report in *The New Paper* opines: "... exhibitionism is characterized by having intense sexual urges or fantasies ... It is a psychiatric disorder because it is deviant ... in certain cases ... it may not be exhibitionism, but merely a case of seeking attention."¹⁸ There are any number of common explanations: aberrant sexual fetishism; mental disturbance; narcissism run amok. The undressed form suggests unruly, ungovernable states of being. Indecent exposure is undesirable confession, a disclosure of individualities otherwise camouflaged by the dictates of polite society, an inscription of stigmata on the collective corpus. The amenable, productive member of society may be traced not to some pre-social body, an organic entity, but rather to the disciplined citizen who demonstrates one fundamental facet of belonging – namely, acquiescing to the group dynamic. While prior existence may of course occur, the privilege of subjecthood takes place only through regulatory modes of being, reiterated as recognizable signs of the socialized, functional citizen-subject.

As Butler would have it, public nudity is a performance of dissent. In its deliberate manifestations, it articulates a refusal to repeat the signs of acculturation, of assimilation into the broader social body. The individual soma that insists on its own physiological realities, its brazen flesh and biological functions, embodies subjective positions otherwise masked by a semiotics of the normative; it repudiates overarching power systems imposed by the nation-group. Of his decision to diverge from the original rendition of *Cane*, Loo comments:

I decided that the exposure of a shaven crotch was artistically more relevant to the piece today ... Ultimately by not replicating Josef's piece exactly, I guess it is also a form of protest, a refusal to allow the authorities to co-opt Josef's original action. I am also

excited by this permutation because of the variety of ways it potentially can be read – if cutting hair is a form of silent protest – and there is no hair left to cut, how can the protest still happen?¹⁹

The climactic revelation bespeaks a resistance to intrusions by the state apparatus. *Brother Cane*, of course, furthered the cause of censorship in Singapore: the National Arts Council condemned the act, Ng was charged in court and fined 1,000 SGD, and both funding and licensing for performance art of all stripes was embargoed, a ban lifted only in 2003, almost a decade later. In simultaneously reimagining and jettisoning Ng's key gesture, Loo presented a *fait accompli*: openly abjuring the original verdict, as well as sidestepping the possibility of renewed censure. As he points out, the process of obtaining the necessary permission to stage *Cane* was centered on the pivotal moment in the original performance: "...it was made clear to me via proxy that they [the Media Development Authority] are still finding the snipping of pubic hair in public problematic. The exact reason why it is problematic was not made clear ... It is ironic that there is more 'nudity' in the new piece than Josef's piece."²⁰ If official disapprobation indeed hinged on the act of trimming one's pubic hair in public, then an already shaven genital area, put on overt display, encompasses that very act and at once elides the rationale behind possible objections.

The sight of a clean-shaven Loo, the hair on both his crotch and his head trimmed down to the skin, also conjures other associations that imply opposition to official ideologies. The manifestation of nudity suggests an eschewal of the national discourse of procreation – or what has been dubbed "an obsession with ideal replication ... transformed through acts of state power into a large-scale project of *biological* reproduction ..."²¹ In the National Day Rally speech of 1983, then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew controversially sparked off the so-called Great Marriage Debate by exhorting more educated women to propagate, in order to address what he perceived as the preference of men with university degrees to pick wives

of a lesser educational background. “We must amend our policies,” he proclaimed, “and try to reshape our demographic configuration so that our better-educated women will have more children to be adequately represented in the next generation ... In some way or other, we must ensure that the next generation will not be too depleted of the talented.”²² Nearly three decades later, the anxiety over the state of the body politic remains. In a scenario of uncannily self-fulfilling proportions, Lee’s son, current Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong – the offspring of two Cambridge graduates, himself an alumnus of Harvard and his parents’ alma mater – noted in his National Rally Speech earlier this year: “... we are having too few babies ... Married couples are having fewer children ... they are not making up for those who are not marrying and having children and 20-30 plus per cent now are not marrying, not having children. So we have a problem.”²³ What the elder Lee identified as the distortion of social patterns by recalcitrant, un-regenerative (female) bodies, is, in the new millennium, a non-reproductive tendency of collective dimensions. Rather than being diluted by inadequate genetic potential, population numbers are simply deteriorating beyond those rates necessary for replenishment, thus ensuring a thinning of the gene pool both qualitatively *and* quantitatively. The citizenry is expressly being called upon to replace itself, its component bodies to perform their patriotic duty.

Therein lies the nub of Loo’s confession in *Cane*, his performance of dissenting subjectivity: he falls into that insubordinate minority, the twenty to thirty percent, openly indicted by the Prime Minister for its contumacy. The deliberate corporeal inflections here are critical. Standing 169 cm tall and tipping the scales at 60 kg,²⁴ the artist is nothing if not slender of build; despite his twenty-eight years, he resembles an adolescent youth, an impression naturally accentuated by the sight of his hairless genitalia, which connotes prepubescence, and a foreclosure of sexual reproductivity. Ditto the appearance of his shaved scalp: while perhaps an acknowledgement of Josef Ng’s own number-three cut in *Brother Cane*,²⁵ it more saliently appropriates the

symbolic force of a monk’s tonsure, thus evoking the surrender of sexual self-propagation. In these mutually reinforcing crosscurrents of signification, the procreative process is emblematically abnegated, a fact that signals the irruption of autobiography into the ostensible reenactment of Ng’s piece. Loo is a self-identified gay man. His queerness is here inscribed onto his anatomy by the simulation of other corporeal geographies – the bald crotch of the child, the depilated head of the cenobite – that likewise elude the imperatives of the mature, heteronormative body, the reproductive capabilities of which are ideally exercised in the service of the nation’s needs. The signposts are triangulated: adolescence, renunciation and homosexuality are bonded by the failure of the procreative principle, by their common denial of the required regeneration of the body politic. As has been pointed out,

... states undertake a process not only of assigning biological sex ... but also (re)inscribing sexed/gendered subjectivity ... States also have a keen interest in the sexual activities of bodies found within the borders of the nation-state, most often expressed through legislation (who can have what kind of sex with whom). They actively seek to subdue, subsume or erase the voices of sexualised Others as a way of ensuring the legitimacy of their own claims to represent the Nation.²⁶

If the communal body requires of its individual units the capacity and the willingness to regenerate, then what is represented by the prohibition of forms of sexual behavior that do not abet this need, is a corporeal coercion – or a triple strike of subduing, subsuming, and erasing the incarnation of somatic, sexual alterities, a harnessing of biopower in the name of the collective good. Homosexuality, like public nudity, is outlawed in Singapore, a legacy of the colonial era that synchronizes all too neatly with the demands of the contemporary nation-state. According to the pertinent legislative expressions, the “indecent exposure” of the latter lexically resonates with the “gross indecency”²⁷ of the former,

a reiterative enunciation that seems to ally, in the eyes of the law, the offenses of public immodesty and non-reproductive coitus. The *corpus delicti*, as such, is figured literally in the openly nude, avowedly queer soma. More than merely revisiting *Brother Cane*, the disclosure of Loo's un-procreative body, volitionally, suggestively hairless, is a richly polysemic move: it coalesces, in the moment of fleshly revelation, various forms of somatic transgressions, while at the same time amalgamating the aesthetic-political considerations of the performance and the meta-register of the performer's own homosexuality. Beyond the formula of a pre-written script, then, acts of self-referentiality are insinuated into the purported reenactment, acts which, at the same time, recuperate Ng's protest against the victimization of gay men, a detail now generally lost to popular view by the moralistic cacophony eclipsing the afterlife of the original work. Re-presentation slips into autobiography, which feeds again into the socio-political imperatives that inform both moments.

As an embodiment of the queered, non-acquiescent body, manifested in a milieu where its desires and articulations are proscribed, the homosexual performative – like the public enactment of nudity – is caught up in dialectics of occlusion and legibility, conformity and confession. It is, concomitantly, encoded (its admission of sexual alterity bound up in corporeal mimesis) and exposed (urgently, publicly, confrontationally nude); it is teasingly elliptical, and insistently visible. Loo's short film, *Chancre* (2011), perhaps instantiates the queer body at its most intimate and its most evasive: four different narratives are recited in turn over the course of the film's shifting images, including excerpts from Paul Gauguin's Tahitian memoir, *Noa, Noa*, English anthropologist Walter Skeat's study, *Malay Magic*, and the "Fragment of an Agon" scene from T. S. Eliot's *Sweeney Agonistes*, as well as, unsurprisingly, a report of personal significance – a recording of Loo discussing his contraction of syphilis. These fractured bits and pieces of narratives are interspersed over an equally motley visual montage: Gauguin's 1894 painting, *Day of the God (Mahana no Atua)*; an old Malay film from the 1950s,

Sumpah Pontianak; footage of an American family's vacations, which include scenes of Hawaii's lush landscape; sequences of Loo's naked body performing a variety of explicit acts, from masturbating, and trimming his pubic hair, to exposing his anus. As that paratactic litany of sources would suggest, the thematic connections here are tenuous, fleeting: Eliot's verse references Gauguin, conjuring the "Gauguin maids in the banyan shades", with Sweeny promising to carry Doris off to "a cannibal isle." Depictions of Hawaii seem to evoke the South Seas setting of the French painter's adventures, which, of course, involved his transmission of syphilis to the native female population of Tahiti – a fact reiterated by Loo's own experience with the disease, having caught it from engaging in anonymous oral sex in Amsterdam.²⁸ The allusions to indigenous Malay mythology, especially Skeat's detailing of *langsuir* folklore – the figure is believed to be the ghost of a woman who died during childbirth – obliquely associate demonic and diseased bodies, spectral and bacterial infection, aligning both forms of corporeal plague.²⁹

The sense of semantic nebulosity is generated at the iconographic level by the series of ambivalent images in *Chancre*. The many close-ups of Loo's body, in particular, evade immediate understanding. The proximity of the camera emphasizes the plurality of textures in the film: the wrinkled, pinched furrows around what looks to be an expanding and contracting orifice, later revealed to be, indeed, the artist's anal region; the webbed surface of a thick fold of flesh, beneath which protrudes a smoother, pink expanse, his foreskin and penis; a flow of yellowish, semi-opaque ooze slowly trickling over flesh, which, rather than the syphilitic discharge one suspects it to be, turns out to be the contents of an egg. Save for a few brief instants, these compositions are framed so closely that other contextual information, like the larger bodily unit and its most distinguishing feature, the face, are omitted; tactile nuance is emphasized almost to the exclusion of visual comprehension. The film ultimately forswears the visual dimension of knowledge, substituting instead the sensuous, haptic pleasures of bodily fragments and surfaces

as an analogue for Loo's testimony of personal affliction. The admission of the artist's disease and sexuality is narrated over the succession of images, yoking, once more, somatic divulgence and subjective experience, in a spliced loop of bare flesh and fraught confession.

The trope of occlusion, in fact, extends from motif to theme to, finally, the censorial discourse dictating the film's accessibility. It was first screened locally as a fringe event at the Singapore International Film Festival in 2011, where it received a R(21) rating. As Loo relates it, further plans to show the film were derailed: "I planned for it to be screened at Valentine Willie Fine Art's annual *Singapore Survey* showcase in August 2012. However, due in part to the fact that private galleries showing work of mature rating are required to apply for a license that entails a payment of a 10,000 SGD security deposit, the idea was scrapped." For its inclusion in the present show, *Chancre* suffered a similar fate: "It was recently an R(21) rating for the *Archiving Cane* exhibition; again, this is a one time license ... The frustrating thing is the fact that we have to submit the film for rating every time we plan to screen it in public here in Singapore ..." ³⁰ The oscillation between censorship and (limited) display, occlusion and perception, is enacted by the regulatory framework of bureaucratic fiat, resulting in a game of peek-a-boo with the public eye, the film slipping into and out of popular consciousness in a pattern superintended by the authorities. An all-too-routine scenario in Singapore, the vicissitudes surrounding each desired screening of the film engenders a mercurial program of exhibition; what ensues are alternating channels of access and denial – now you see it, now you don't – that correspond to the pictorial ambiguity and narrative open-endedness of the film. The cumulative affect, at last, is one of spectatorial uncertainty, a play of observability and obscurity attending the catalogue of Loo's bodily parts: served up as corporeal components that do not quite cohere into the individual, a constituted subject, no more than visual intimations of the terse, disquieting narrative recited by a voice discarnate.

Self-pollution, public nudity and the homosexual performative are commensurate indices. In their particular ways, each measures the subject-effect of subalternity. The subaltern is the subject of "inferior rank", "whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way." ³¹ The distinguishing characteristic of the subaltern classes is, fundamentally, their exclusion from the mechanisms of power and control, i.e. dominance: "subordination cannot be understood except as one of the constitutive terms in a binary relationship of which the other is dominance" ³²; Gayatri Spivak has remarked that the "work involved ... is indeed a task of "measuring silences" ³³, of what a text cannot or refuses to say. The soiled body, the nude body and the queered one, then, figure forth the articulation of subjectivities otherwise foreclosed by hegemonic configurations. The "silences" here register beyond speech. The adherence to both social and legal norms regulating admissible forms of behavior – appropriate hygiene, appropriate dress, appropriate intercourse – embodies the silence of compliant corporealities, those individual bodies that conform to the operations and requirements of the aggregate body. In declaring somatic vulgarities as verities, *his* verities, Loo Zihan's work hypostatizes the subaltern condition; the body revealed is the subject disclosed, its flesh and its functions a signal of critical, fundamental identities displaced by collective dispositions.

There are, then, various sorts of bodies here: normative bodies, homosexual bodies, bodies of state and of subject, confessional bodies.

NOTES

1. *Cane* was staged for the first time in Singapore in February 2012. A video of the entire performance is archived online: <<http://vimeo.com/37993908>>.
2. See Sexton's *The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator* and *The Fury of Cocks*.
3. The annual *Singapore Survey* exhibition is organized by Valentine Willie Fine Art, Singapore.
4. Loo Zihan, in a personal e-mail to the author, October 30, 2012.
5. According to the artist. Loo, e-mail to the author, October 30, 2012.
6. See Mary Douglas's classic study, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 36.
7. Loo, in a personal e-mail to the author, October 23, 2012.
8. Ray Langenbach, "Leigong Da Doufu: Looking Back at "Brother Cane" in *Looking at Culture*, eds. Sanjay Krishnan *et al* (Singapore: Chung Printing, 1996), 123 – 136. See p. 127.
9. The footage is included in the recording of *Cane*, on Vimeo; see note no.1 above.
10. See Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1994), for a study of the sight-knowledge complex.
11. The articles and letter are, respectively, Adeline Chia, "Controversy revisited", *The Straits Times*, October 20, 2011; Corrie Tan, "Cane re-enactment draws debate", *The Straits Times*, February 16, 2012; Pek Li Sng, "Why show Brother Cane again?", *The Straits Times*, Life! Mailbag, February 18, 2012.
12. Mary Douglas, qtd. in Anthony Synnott and David Howes, "From Measurement to Meaning. Anthropologies of the Body", *Anthropos*, Bd. 87, H. 1/3. (1992), pp. 147 – 166. See p. 159.
13. For a sustained interrogation of the relations between performance art and the state in Singapore in the 1990s, see Ray Langenbach, *Performing the Singapore State 1988 - 1995* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Western Sydney, 2004).
14. Chua Hian Hou, "More cases of people going nude in public", *The Straits Times*, December 15, 2010.
15. So states Section 27A of the Miscellaneous Offences (Public Order and Nuisance) Act (Chapter 184).
16. Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York & London: Routledge, 1993), p. 3.

17. Butler, p. 12.
18. Hedy Khoo, "Thrill or mental disorder?", *The New Paper*, April 20, 2009.
19. Loo, e-mail, October 23, 2012.
20. Loo, e-mail, October 23, 2012.
21. Geraldine Heng and Janadas Devan, "State Fatherhood: The Politics of Nationalism, Sexuality, and Race in Singapore", in *Nationalisms and Sexualities*, eds. Andrew Parker *et al* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 343 – 64. See p. 344.
22. See the transcript of Lee Kuan Yew's speech, "Talent for the Future", *The Straits Times*, August 15, 1983.
23. The text of Lee Hsien Loong's 2012 National Rally Speech is located on the website of the Prime Minister's Office: <<http://www.pmo.gov.sg/content/pmosite/mediacentre.html>>.
24. These figures are provided by the artist himself.
25. Ng was, at the time of his performance in 1994, fulfilling his national service obligations.
26. See Leonore T. Lyons, "Sexing the nation: normative heterosexuality and the 'good' Singaporean citizen", *University of Wollongong Research Online* (2004), pp. 2 – 3. The essay is found at <<http://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1091&context=artspapers>>.
27. Section 377A of Singapore's Penal Code proscribes "any act of gross indecency" between two men.
28. As revealed in a personal conversation with the artist, November 15, 2012.
29. The theme of diseased/ghostly bodies is first broached in Loo's student film, *Sophia* (2007), viewable online at <<http://vimeo.com/24251657>> and <<http://vimeo.com/24252599>>.
30. Both quotes are from an e-mail to the author, November 19, 2012.
31. See Ranajit Guha's Preface in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, eds. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 35.
32. Guha and Spivak, p. 35.
33. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 271-313. See p. 286.