

CANE

by Loo Zihan

Performance Score

Time: 8pm

Date: February 19, 2012 (Sunday)

Venue: The Substation Theatre, 45 Armenian Street, Singapore 179936

Submission of score to the Media Development Authority for approval on December 15, 2011

License for performance granted on February 10, 2012 (R18: Nudity)

Description of Space: The seating in the Substation Theatre is completely retracted, leaving an empty space. 24 white chairs are placed along the length of the space, 12 on each side. There is a white strip of linoleum flooring which stretches across the length and center of the floor. Two projection screens are in the space, one on each end. There is a microphone stand in the center of the space.

Audience enters space, house lights at fifty percent.

Introduction

General lighting fades up with a spotlight on the microphone stand. Zihan will be providing the following introduction at the microphone stand. His head is completely shaven and he is dressed in formal white attire with a bow tie and gloves:

Good evening and welcome to this evening's performance of Cane. Cane is a reconstruction of Josef Ng's *Brother Cane* in 1993 based on multiple accounts from various agencies. Six accounts will be presented over the course of this evening, the performance will last approximately ninety minutes.

As you must have realized there is no fixed seating, you are welcomed to occupy any of the available chairs at the side, and move around during the performance.

Tonight, we will lift the usual rule in cinemas and theatres about not taking photos or video recordings of this performance; you are encouraged to do so via your smart phones for your own keepsake or memory. You are also welcome to provide your account of tonight's performance online. Please 'check-in' to tonight's performance and tweet about it real-time if you wish to do so.

There will be a post-show discussion immediately after the show. Samantha and Teck Siang will be helping to document tonight's performance and as part of the piece, documentation will be uploaded online for public access. By joining me this evening, you have consented to be part of this performance and its documentation. Are there any questions at this moment?

*Zihan will answer any immediate questions or clarifications from the audience, if any.

I hope you enjoy tonight's performance and thank you for being part of Cane.

1st Account: The Singaporean Media

20 minutes: Zihan will provide this chronological account of the media's reporting of the incident at the microphone stand, he reads excerpts from articles while corresponding scans of these articles are flashed on both projection screens at the end of the space.

This first section is the Media's account of *Brother Cane*. I will be reading excerpts from twelve articles culled from the media reports of this incident.

House lights fade down, leaving a spotlight on the microphone stand. After Zihan finishes reading each excerpt he will pass the photocopied article to audience members for circulation.

The New Paper, January 3, 1994

Reported by Ng Li San

Two Singaporean artists saluted the New Year early on Saturday with unusual versions of the traditional "bottoms up".

One vomited. The other turned his back on the audience, bared his buttocks and then trimmed his pubic hair. They said they were protesting against media reporting.

It was part of a 12-Hour New Year's Eve event put up by members of Fifth Passage Artists Ltd and Artists Village on the open corridor at the fifth floor of Parkway Parade.

Artist Josef "Brother Cane" Ng pasted a Straits Times report on the arrests of 12 men during an anti-gay operation in November 1993 on each of 12 tiles. He then placed tofu and a packet of red liquid on each tile.

Cloaked in a black robe, he danced around the hall with a cane, whacked each tile and said: [quote] "They were three strokes of the cane"[end quote]. The liquid splattered and stained the mashed tofu red.

Then, Mr. Ng did his trimming-of-pubic-hair act.

He piled the hair on a tile, and asked for a cigarette. Suddenly, he pressed the lit cigarette against his upper arm, burning himself.

Mr. Ng explained: [quote] "It's a protest performance. I agree those men (who were arrested) were guilty of soliciting. But the press didn't have to print their names. And why were the men caned when they had already received a jail term?" [end quote]

The New Paper, January 5, 1994

NAC find the acts vulgar and completely distasteful, which deserve public condemnation. By no stretch of the imagination can such acts be construed and condoned as art. Such acts, in fact, debase art and lower the public's esteem for art and artists in general.

If the artist has any grievances there are many other proper ways to give vent to their feelings. Artists with talent do not have to resort to antics in order to draw attention to themselves or to communicate their feelings or ideas.

The Straits Times, January 22, 1994

[quote] “The performances may be exploited to agitate the audience on volatile social issues, or to propagate the beliefs and messages of deviant social or religious groups, or as a means of subversion” [end quote] the statement said.

The following action will be taken:

Police will reject all future applications by the group, 5th Passage, for a public entertainment license to stage any such performance without fixed scripts.

The two men involved in the acts will be barred from future public performances. The police will reject applications for public entertainment licenses for any performance or exhibition by 5th Passage or any other group involving artist Josef Ng Sing Chor, 22 and art student Shannon Tham Kuok Leong, 20.

The NAC will bar 5th Passage from getting any grant or assistance. It will also not support “performance art” or “forum theatre” staged by other groups, but their other projects will be considered.

The Straits Times, February 23, 1994

Reported by Koh Buck Song

In a faxed statement last Thursday, Ms Sherry Giang, NIE’s Assistant Manager (Public Relations) wrote: [quote] “Taking performance art off the curriculum has never been an issue. Performance art per se is not a module taught within the Division of Art. It is one of the topics covered in a module called Art Criticism and Contextual Studies.

In surveying contemporary developments in this module, the inclusion of performance art as a topic is necessary and inevitable for completeness.” [end quote]

NAFA principal Dr. Soh Kay Cheng said performance art was not on the academy’s curriculum. [quote] “The graduation show is only for what we have taught the students, so there is no place for it,” [end quote] he explained.

Mr. Goh Ee Choo, a senior lecturer in fine arts and an artist himself, said that the academy could have taken a more accommodating view of Miss Tan’s proposed act if not for the 5th Passage incident.

He said that NAFA’s 100 fine arts students are specifically taught that art must not speak out on race and religion or express anti-government views.

The Straits Times, March 11, 1994

Reported by Martha Bayles

republished from The Atlantic Monthly, an American neo-conservative magazine

Obscenity is shocking because it violates our sense of shame. In puritanical cultures, the slightest reference to the body causes undue shame. But that does not mean we should never feel shame. It is a natural response to nakedness, eroticism and suffering.

One may hesitate to place too much faith in the aesthetic judgment of common people. But better they than the shock artists, with their fond belief that if something is shockingly degrading and dehumanizing, it is, perforce, art.

At least the mainstream is likely to weigh the claims of art against those of decency and morality.

Yet, all this stale posturing proves is that some artists are so isolated from the rest of the world that their ideas never undergo a reality check. In one breath, they vow to disrupt the (presumably) repressive social order. In the next, they complain that the power behind that order – the government will not pay their bills.

The Straits Times, March 11, 1994

Reported by Koh Buck Song

Shock art only works once; the deviant cannot keep on surprising. After a while, the audience has seen it all. And then confrontation defeats its own purpose. Also, without public support – in the form of a shared concern in appreciable numbers for the same issues – those who protest soon become rebels without a meaningful cause.

The Straits Times, March 16, 1994

The recent controversial performance by the arts group 5th passage was a good opportunity to define which areas are off-limits to the arts in Singapore, Minister for Information and the Arts BG George Yeo said yesterday.

He said he applauded and encouraged the National Arts Council for taking a firm stand against the performance.

[quote] “When we promoted the arts, we said, look, the old OB markers have to be widened and we will determine the new OB markers when it is clear where they should be. And when this incident took place, I said, ah, this is a very good spot to plant a new OB marker.” [end quote]

Noting that it was good to define the boundaries in the long-term, BG Yeo added: [quote] “When the boundaries are clear, then those who act within the boundaries are free. But when the boundaries are not clear, those who act within the boundaries become unfree.” [end quote]

The Sunday Times, November 13, 1994

Commentary by Tan Tarn How

If society is a tree, and its fringes are the leaves at the tree’s outermost reaches, then trimming the fringe, where the youngest, tenderest leaves grow nearest to the light, can only stunt the growth of the centre. That is how you get the little bonsai plants, pretty but poor imitations of the real thing.

Now that the storm over the so-called “Josef Ng affair” – made an affair by the media and subsequent government actions – has blown over, we can get on with our lives. It looks

like nothing significant has transpired. But the past, no matter how much it may be forgotten, has a way of catching up with us.

The difficulty with art is it lies midway between the public and the private, personal choice to be part of it. By censoring Josef Ng and proscribing his art form, the Government is making clear its view on two things, that art is as public as any of the speeches that politicians make, and that art in itself is no defence against the restrictions imposed on such public acts.

The Straits Times, November 20, 1994

Commentary by Sumiko Tan

As far as 5th passage was concerned, I suspect that many Singaporeans supported the NAC's action. Notwithstanding the artistic reasons offered in defence, what Ng did was clearly disgusting. The public has a right to be protected from this.

The Straits Times, February 8, 1994

Commentary by Koh Buck Song

The 5th Passage incident is now teaching a new lesson of patience, at some cost to the development of the arts here. People change slowly, and it is only by a long process of education and exposure that they might come to accept what they used to condemn.

Some do not change at all, and might never accept that some forms of expression have the right to exist and even to deserve applause.

That is why any artist who wants to project the darker side of life and challenge social norms must take his time. He must take time to gain acceptance from sectors of the audience he is unfamiliar with, and so unfriendly towards, his aims. He must take time with thought and technique, so that if he wishes to make a statement, even a political one, he can craft it with some style, substance and subtlety.

There are other avenues for dissent: the press, Members of Parliament and other voices of civil society. And as anyone who has spoken before through these means will know, such things also take time. A lot of time.

The Straits Times, February 8, 1994

Commentary by T. Sasitharan

Art is born of inspiration, not prescription. So each time the parameters of the permissible are re-drawn to diminish artistic space, more artists – often the more committed and imaginative ones – will be forced either to give up entirely or turn their sights on safe but dead and fossilized forms imported enbloc from elsewhere or the past.

If this goes on long enough, all that will come out of the multi-million-dollar ovens of the Singapore Arts Centre will be a flat, distasteful cultural cake, condemned to stand forever on the shelves of the international marketplace of the arts.

Sure, you will always have your Cats and your Les Mizzs and your Chorus Line and your Tresors. But you will have nothing of the soul of Singapore and nothing of ourselves holding it all up.

What the likes of Ng and Tham do now may be nothing more than a minor footnote in the history of Singapore art when it is finally written. But if artists here lose the verve, conviction and imagination to go on doing honest and uncompromising work, that history may not be worth writing at all.

Asiaweek, Volume 7, July 1995

Staff interview with BG George Yeo

Performance art relies on strong psychological interaction between the performers and the audience. It makes for a more intense experience and it's a device which is as old as society. All religions use it. If you attend a charismatic revival, they require you to do things that make the experience a more psychologically involved one. The Communists use it in cells, where they encourage young recruits to narrate their experiences and make certain commitments. Group therapies employ the techniques, like Alcoholics Anonymous.

So there's nothing new about performance art. But we are mindful that if misused, it can be exploitative and manipulative. But well used, it can make an artistic performance more interesting and more fulfilling.

2nd Account: The Trial Affidavit

2 minutes: General lighting fades up. Zihan will be providing this account at the microphone stand.

The police charged Josef Ng on January 6, 1994 for committing [quote], "an obscene act, to wit, by cutting (his) pubic hair and exposing (his) buttocks to the annoyance of the public" [end quote] and his trial was on May 17, 1994. Josef pleaded guilty to the charges and was sentenced to pay a fine of one thousand dollars.

5th passage gallery manager Iris Tan was convicted of [quote], "providing entertainment without a license" [end quote] and was sentenced to pay a fine of seven hundred dollars.

The following account of *Brother Cane* is an adaptation from Josef's trial affidavit, provided by academic and fellow performance artist Ray Langenbach, and is also collected in his PhD Thesis. I would like to invite Ray to perform a 'live' reading of his account.

3 minutes: Ray comes to the microphone and reads his account. Zihan adjourns to strip down to a pair of black briefs and wears a black robe in preparation for the 'live' reenactment. Zihan will be performing this transition at a corner of the performance space.

15 minutes: Josef Ng, dressed in a long black robe and black briefs, carefully laid out tiles on the floor in a semi-circle. He placed the news cutting, "12 Men nabbed in Anti-Gay Operation at Tanjong Rhu" from *The Straits Times* on each tile. He then carefully placed a block of tofu on each tile along with a small plastic bag of red poster paint.

1 minute: Ng crouches behind one tile and read random words from the news cutting.

5 minutes: Ng picked up a rotan and striking the floor with it rhythmically, he performed a dance, swaying and leaping from side to side, and finally ending in a low crouching posture.

3 minutes: Muttering softly, "Three strokes of cane, I will give them three strokes of cane", Ng approached the tofu blocks, tapping the rotan rhythmically on the floor. He tapped twice next to each block, counting, "One, two three", striking the bags of paint and tofu forcefully on the third swing.

1 minute: After striking all the tofu blocks, Ng says "I have heard that clipping hair could be a form of silent protest". He walks to the far end of the gallery space. Facing the wall with his back to the audience, he lowers his briefs [about 2/3 of the way down] his buttocks. He carried out an action that the audience could not see and returns to the performance space placing a small amount of cut pubic hair on the centre tile.

1 minute: Ng asks for a cigarette from the audience, and has it lit. He smokes a few puffs, and then, saying, "Sometimes silent protest is not enough," stubs out the cigarette on his arm. He says "Thank you," and puts on his robe. He receives enthusiastic applause from the audience, and requests help in cleaning up the tofu. A few members of the audience assist in this process.

3rd and 4th Account: The Re-enactments

35 minutes: Ray clears the microphone stand after he finishes. Zihan returns to the center of the performance space and speaks without a microphone.

I re-enacted *Brother Cane* for the first time as part of a performance module in NTU conducted by Amanda Heng in 2007. The second re-enactment was as part of a graduate student showcase in Chicago while I was pursuing my Masters of Fine Arts.

My main interest in the re-performance of this piece lies in using my performing body to recuperate the public memory of *Brother Cane*. I will be presenting this re-enactment for the final time this evening in cadence with video documentation of the piece performed in Chicago.

General lights fade down, with a focus on the center performance area covered with the white linoleum flooring. Video documentation from Chicago will be played on one screen in the space. On the opposite screen, 'live' feed from the camera documenting Zihan's performance will be projected in real time.

The audio recording of the Chicago documentation can be heard in the background. The 'live' performance by Zihan will be carried out largely in silence, with the documentation stating the instructions for each stage of the re-enactment. A timer will be used to keep time, and similar to the Chicago performance, Zihan will wait for the timer to go off after each stage of the re-performance is completed.

Zihan in the 'live' performance will restate two lines – “they have said that a clean shave is a form of silent protest” and “maybe, a silent protest is not enough”, that the wording of these two lines are different from Ray’s affidavit account is intentional, these are the two lines that are transcribed from video documentation of Josef’s performance.

Zihan’s actions will deviate from Josef Ng’s original performance significantly in two instances.

The first instance, when it comes to the moment when Zihan is supposed to be re-enacting Josef’s snipping, Zihan will lower his briefs to reveal a clean shaven crotch to the audience, he will have a pair of scissors in his right hand and will be directing his gaze at each member of the audience. *There will be no 'live' snipping of pubic hair in this performance.*

The second instance, Zihan will ask the audience for a cigarette as per Josef’s original performance and will say:

Due to the National Environment Agency’s prohibition on smoking in indoor spaces, this section of the performance will have to take place within the smoking area outside. You are welcomed to follow me to witness this section of the performance.

The video recording of the performance in Chicago will be paused at this moment and Zihan will adjourn to the smoking area outside of The Substation to complete this section of the performance. He will return to the theatre after this section and the video recording will resume playing. This section will take approximately ten minutes.

5th Account: The Video Document

20 minutes: After Zihan has completed his re-enactment, the lights will fade to blackout and the video recording of Josef’s performance documented by Ray Langenbach will be played on both screens at each end of the space. Zihan will continue his performance of cleaning up in the darkness, clearing the tofu and red dye as the video progresses. The photographer Samantha will download the photos she has documented over the course of the evening onto a computer while this video is playing.

6th Account: Post-Show Dialogue

30 minutes: House lights fade up, Zihan, dressed in a black robe is standing in front of a screen at the far end of the space. There are two chairs in front of it.

Thank you for being part of this evening’s performance. We will now have approximately half an hour for a brief post show dialogue. I would like to invite *Brother Cane* to moderate this evening’s discussion. Please join me in welcoming him.

Josef Ng steps up to take a seat in one of the two chairs, the discussion commences. While the discussion is ongoing, photo documentation of the evening’s performance will be projected on both screens.

END