

Interview: Loo Zihan



After his controversial re-staging of the infamous performance piece *Brother Cane*, artist Loo Zihan responds to the backlash with *Archiving Cane*. **Tania De Rozario** learns more

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In a country where homosexuality is a particularly taboo topic, Singaporean artist, actor and film director Loo Zihan has never shied away from his sexuality. The openly gay artist, 29, first came into local prominence in 2007, when his short film *Autopsy* – documenting a dialogue between his mother and himself about his sexuality – was screened at the second Singapore's Short Circuit Film Festival. That same year, his first full length film *Solos* was meant to debut at the 20th Singapore International Film Festival, but was withdrawn due to its explicit homosexual content – the film nevertheless went on to become the first Singaporean film to be shown at the American Film Institute Festival in Los Angeles and won awards at the Turin Gay and Lesbian Festival in Italy.

One of Loo's most controversial projects to date has been *Cane*, performed earlier this year at the 2012 M1 Singapore Fringe Festival. In part a reenactment of Josef Ng's *Brother Cane* – the infamous 1993 performance piece staged in protest over the entrapment of 12 gay men, in which Ng cut his pubic hair and burnt himself with a lit cigarette, resulting in a ten year performance ban in Singapore – Loo's performance reignited the public debate about obscenity laws and censorship.

Since then, Loo has been compiling an online archive (entitled *Archiving Cane* on Facebook) of newspaper clippings and related materials dating back to the creation of *Brother Cane*, and documenting resulting furore and backlash over both performances.

An exhibition of the materials and additional performances is being held at The Substation until 16 Dec, with Loo acting as an gallery attendant and requesting identification cards from viewers – due to licensing restrictions, only those aged 21 and above will be able to enter; as a further commentary to the restrictions, all guests will receive photocopied catalogues with their IDs. Here Loo tells us more.

What inspired *Archiving Cane*?

The idea of *Archiving Cane* came about after the conclusion of *Cane* in February 2012. There were both compliments and criticisms leveled at my reenactment of *Brother Cane* and it seemed necessary to extend my research. It was also important for me to take a step back to assess the situation and allow the heated discussions and emotions some time to settle. *Archiving Cane* was conceptualized as a method of consolidating and taking

stock of both performances.

I am also interested in the act of archiving because it is an antithesis to performance. Performance studies scholar Rebecca Schneider calls the act of preservation the 'bone' to performance's 'flesh'. The greatest frustration I personally had with *Cane*, which some critics have rightfully pointed out, was due to the limitations of the performative mode I chose. There exists a lot more unrepresented accounts of how *Brother Cane* can be remembered in the community. With *Archiving Cane*, I hope to open up the space to the public and my critics by inviting them to reconstruct and 'correct' the social memory of *Brother Cane* and *Cane*. The audience's contribution completes the work.

Tell us a bit about what we'll experience at the Substation.

I will be stationed in the space over the length of the exhibition and perform the role of facilitator and gallery sitter. It is my responsibility to ensure that all attendees to the exhibition are of legal age so that The Substation, who pays an annual security deposit for a license to show works of a mature rating, can retain their \$20,000 security deposit. It will not be the focus of this presentation, but it is impossible to create work in Singapore without challenging the relationship between art and the authorities, since the government has taken on the responsibility to police and license – and in effect endorse all exhibitions and performances. I am making the obstacles transparent by publicising the steps required to realise the exhibition on *Archiving Cane*'s Facebook page. Hopefully I can educate the public on the hoops of fire artists, curators and galleries are made to leap through in order to stage an exhibition.

I am also having an open call for submissions to invite attendees to contribute an artifact of *Brother Cane* or *Cane* for photo and video documentation in the gallery space. These contributed memories or artifacts can be fictional or actual objects relating to these performances; they'll be organised and uploaded online for public access after the conclusion of the exhibition.

And there's going to be a photocopier in the gallery?

Yes! On top of pure aesthetics, there will be a functional purpose: It will be used to photocopy the identification document of all exhibition attendees as evidence that they are of legal age to participate in the exhibition. The photocopy machine will also be used as a cost effective method to customize and print the catalogue for the exhibition for all exhibition attendees. *Cane* questioned authenticity and the value of the 'copy'; the presence of a mechanical reproduction device in a gallery space is meant to reference Walter Benjamin's essay questioning the value of art in the age of mechanical reproduction.

Any idea what Josef Ng thinks about all of this?

I have informed him about this exhibition, but I have yet to hear back from him. In my opinion, from previous conversations with Josef, he wants *Brother Cane* to live on beyond him. His decision of granting me permission to stage *Cane* and sending Thai performance artist Michael Shawanosai in his stead for the post-show dialogue during the February performance is sending out a clear message that he has moved on from the shadow of *Brother Cane*.

[*Loo Zihan: Archiving Cane is at The Substation from 7-16 Dec.*](#)