



Photo Credit: Senemara Ho

LOO ZIHAN (PERFORMANCE ART)

Censorship in Singapore.

Just to clarify, I didn't start off as a performance artist—I started out trained as a filmmaker, and I went overseas to pursue an education in filmmaking. But we won't get into that.

So it's infamously known that Singapore restricted the license of performance art for 10 years, from 1993/4 to 2003/4. And when people constantly ask you about it, you end up repeating the same few words "prosecution, restriction, censorship, NAC". But over time, I've come to realise that censorship is actually the only thing that probably makes Singaporean art and its art scene very unique, or exotic to foreign audiences.

That said, things have definitely changed, but the question is always whether it has changed for the better; and I've said this many times before, but the censorship system now is a little bit more intrinsic — artist self-censors, theatre companies self-censor, because what's at stake is monetary, financial and commercial interests. So it's less overt, it's less talked down, it's much more hidden, obscure but it still happens. Whether it has changed for the better or for the worse, only time will be able to clarify. But it's just a different system of control.

I just came from the Media Development Authority (MDA) because I had to send all my DVDs that I will be showing in my exhibition for rating, and it cost me about \$200 to rate five DVDs. Then I had to wait for 6 weeks, so I have to plan ahead and send them in at least 2 months in advance. So this sort of restriction is interesting, having to jump through a lot of hoops, but it also changes the initial art work; so you cannot be a spontaneous performance artist.

Everything has to be choreographed and calibrated. So I guess what's not addressed is how the censorship and legalisation systems have actually affected, or become a creator and a player in the art scene, and affecting the process of art making.

An ideal Singapore.

So what will be an ideal Singapore and how can Singapore be ideal? I guess when you remove the censorship, you remove the identity of being Singaporean, in a way. Similarly, by saying that an ideal Singapore doesn't have censorship and everybody can do whatever they want, then that's not Singapore! Conditions and circumstances always have to evolve on their own terms, in their own time, and under the right conditions and the right climate. Everything you put into the world is not isolated in itself and is part of the larger environment.

National identity.

I guess for different artists they have different beliefs. I know there are some artists that say, "oh I'm a citizen of the world. My art doesn't have location nor nationality." For me, I tend to believe in the second option, which is that it has to be rooted in something pro-local, located within a site in order for a larger international audience to appreciate it. The best example at this current moment will be the movie *Ilo Ilo*. It's very much Singaporean and very rooted in our culture, but it's acceptable to an international audience. This is exactly because it has a unique flavour of what it means to be Singaporean in the 90s. I believe in those kind of art products more than the international migrant kind of thing.

The five DVDs.

They are a documentation for an upcoming exhibition at Sculpture Square, and they

all revolve around the performance that happened 20 years ago that resulted in the infamous ban. I'm more into the archiving process now, so it's a lot of looking and digging out newspapers around that particular incident and cataloguing them, digitising them, trying to clarify what happened in 1993/4 and how we can perhaps learn from that particular experience and make sure it doesn't happen again.

So at the end of this year on December 31st, it will be the 20th anniversary of Josef Ng's performance. Those tapes were documentation from the original performance by artist academic Ray Langenbach.

Performance art is art.

This has been an age old debate, and there are many ways I can defend performance art. The most obvious way is that it is the sculpting of the body. What do you do when you paint? Is it not logical to say that the painter, in the process of the final painting, is performing? Painting is basically rendering and recording your actions onto the canvas. So there's always a performance. It's just that performance art in itself brings the performance aspect to the foreground, so it's no longer hidden or no longer in the background. So it's always relevant — it's not that it isn't there, it's just not visible.

Proudest performance to date.

You know, the standard answer that all artists say is, "my next performance." because you are always thinking about what you are going to do next. But I probably shouldn't comply and give that kind of answer. So I'm going to say that my most memorable performance was not exactly considered a performance — it's the valedictorian speech that I gave during my graduation. ☐

