

Towards Social Change: Performance Art in Singapore

By Loredana Pazzini-Paracciani

Singapore, renowned for its tidiness, efficiency, social order and technological development, is adding its relevance as an international art hub to this already impressive list. The efforts that the government is undertaking to place Singapore on the art-world map, particularly within the Southeast Asia region, are commendable. Singapore has covered a lot of ground in the last 20 years – from welcoming international art fairs, to the forthcoming launch of the National Art Gallery, art festivals and its own biennale.

On the one hand, this indicates a formidable development of the art scene in the small island-state. On the other, censorship and regulations in the art-making process are still impinging on Singapore's artistic creativity.

Prominent in this regard was the ban imposed on performance art in 1994 by the National Arts Council (NAC), after the controversial performance of *Brother Cane*, by Josef Ng. The ban was lifted in 2003, after almost 10 years, although artists are still required to obtain a licence to perform and regulations still apply. These govern subject-matter, spontaneity and risk-taking, all integral elements of performance art.

The pivotal *The Artists Village* (TAV) group was hit hard by the 1994 NAC provision. Much of the momentum they had accumulated was lost, along with some of their practitioners. The group had been founded in 1988 by Tang Da Wu precisely with the aim of experimenting with traditional art practices in Singapore.

Notwithstanding this, many Singapore artists have overcome the limitations of the ban and post-ban periods by experimenting with performance art via a multiplicity of art strategies that span both conceptual art and more traditional practices.

Jeremy Hiah, interdisciplinary artist and vice-president of TAV, produced the photographic essay *Paradise Terrorize* in 2008 as part of a bigger production that started in 2004 under the title *Raw/War*. The idea was to underline the duality of concepts such as peace/war, love/hatred, freedom/restraint, by employing photography as a visual strategy to document a staged performance.

Hiah, together with fellow performance artists from TAV, Lee Wen, Tang Da Wu and Kai Lam, among others, perform a 'tribal' dance in *Paradise Danger Dancers*, perhaps a ritual to exorcise demons or prepare for combat. The performers are half-naked but for diapers and masks.

Beyond the affecting association of the balaclava with the tribal notion of a gathering – a reminder that we are all part of a ritual whether prescribed by tradition, religion or society – the significance of this piece in the Singapore context lies even further, that is, the photograph, acting as documentation, enables both the artist and the viewer



Paradise Danger Dancer, ed. 1/8, 2006, digital print on canvas, 121 ´ 182 cm. Singapore Art Museum collection.

to participate in the art-making process. By evoking performance rituals through the photographic medium, the work becomes refreshing and stimulating, despite the gravity of the thematic approach.

It is in recognition of subtle works such as *Paradise Danger Dancers* that Singapore is slowly engaging in social change, moving towards a better understanding and repositioning of performance art in the local art scene. By bringing to the fore a work labelled photographic, but which is essentially performative, Hiah facilitates the validity of performance art as an act of artistic and conceptual expression not to be feared, but to be welcomed and nurtured.

This and other works in Singapore contemporary art history have served as stepping stones to greater acceptance of performance art – changes that brought *Brother Cane* back full circle in 2012. Seventeen years after Josef Ng's controversial performance, Singapore artist Loo Zhian reenacted *Brother Cane* and thereby closed the chapter on this event. Loo's reenactment, together with public support and the authorities' concurrence, has opened the possibility of a new discourse on performance art, a discourse that suffered a temporal fracture for almost 10 years before resurfacing in the Singapore art scene.

Loredana Pazzini-Paracciani has a Masters degree in Asian Art Histories. She writes for numerous publications and works as an independent curator for commercial and institutional places in Singapore and Bangkok. Her academic and curatorial focus and research revolve mostly around contemporary art in Thailand and Singapore.
