



MOSTRA INTERNAZIONALE  
D'ARTE CINEMATOGRAFICA  
La Biennale di Venezia 2017

Orizzonti  
Competition

**caniba**

a film by Verena Paravel, Lucien Castaing-Taylor

## Synopsis

Caniba is a fresco about flesh and desire. It reflects on the discomfiting significance of cannibalism in human existence through the prism of one Japanese man, Issei Sagawa, and his mysterious relationship with his brother, Jun Sagawa.

A 32-year old student at the Sorbonne in Paris, Issei Sagawa was arrested on June 13, 1981 when spotted emptying two bloody suitcases containing the remains of his Dutch classmate, Renée Hartevelt, into a lake in the Bois de Boulogne. Two days earlier, he had killed her while she was translating German Romantic poetry over dinner in his apartment. After shooting her in the back of the head, Mr. Sagawa raped and then ate his way through her corpse. Eventually, fatigued and dizzy from the heat and smell, he decided to discard her remains. Declared legally insane, he returned to Japan. He has been a free man since. Ostracized from society, he has lived off his crime for over 30 years. He has written novels and manga comics that recount his crime in detail. He has starred in documentaries and pornographic films. He has also served as a food critic. He still expresses his desire to consume human flesh and to die at the hands and in the mouth of a fellow cannibal.



## statement

Caniba is a film that reflects on the discomfiting significance of cannibalistic desire in human existence through the prism of one Japanese man, Issei Sagawa, and his mysterious relationship with his brother, Jun Sagawa. Rather than taking cover behind facile outrage, or creating a masquerade out of humanity's voyeuristic attraction to the grotesque, as has been the case for the multitude of journalistic representations of Issei Sagawa (Japanese and international alike), we try to treat cannibalistic desire and acts with the unnerving gravity they deserve. Cannibalism is a litmus test of cultural relativism, a longstanding subject of anthropological inquiry, and a central trope of colonial discourse and post-colonial critical theory from Melville and Montaigne, to Oswald de Andrade. In Caniba cannibalism emerges as closer to the human condition than most of us ever suppose, both because it is replete with affinities to sexuality and spirituality — the desire to become One with the Other, the theological doctrine of transubstantiation and longing for Atonement, practices such as menophilia and vampyrism — and because in our evolutionary history it implicates humanity as a whole. Formerly prevalent not just in Polynesia, but across the Americas, Australasia, Asia, and Europe, cannibalism is part and parcel of the prehistory, and arguably also the repressed preternatural longings, of us all.

On June 13, 1981, Issei Sagawa, a 32 year-old doctoral student at the Sorbonne, was caught disposing of two suitcases in a park on the outskirts of Paris. They contained the putrefying remains of his fellow classmate, a Dutch woman named Renée Hartevelt, whom he'd shot while she translated German Romantic poetry over dinner in his apartment at 10 rue Erlanger two days before, and whose corpse he'd then proceeded to have sex with, before eating her body, and finally discarding her remains in the Bois de Boulogne. Found unfit to stand trial and deported to Japan two years later, he checked himself out of a mental institution on August 12, 1985



A free man ever since, he has made his living off his crime (writing novels, drawing manga, appearing in innumerable documentaries and sexploitation films in which he reenacts his crime, and even directing his own personal pornography “experiment”), and as a sushi restaurant critic. The irony that he has subsisted off his infamy is not lost on him, and indeed he perceives it as the proper punishment for his crime. Astonishingly forthcoming about his anthropophagous condition, he has also expressed his unremitting desire to eat more human flesh (initially female, white, and blond, but now increasingly Japanese), as well as his wish to die at the hands and in the mouth of a fellow cannibal.

Unlike the countless journalistic articles on Sagawa, with their predictable moralistic pieties about the irredeemable heinousness of his crime, in which is it impossible to discern the vulnerable, disturbed human being behind the grotesque public persona he is carted out to perform, in our film we see Issei-san seeking vainly to come to some kind of moral reckoning with his act, and his apprehensions about his anthropophagous desire. The film is set in his small home on the outskirts of Tokyo, and depicts his daily life, and long conversations with his brother Jun-san. Issei-san suffered from a stroke a few years ago, is an ailing diabetic, and his brother Jun is his principal carer. As the film proceeds, the complexity of their relationship slowly emerges (it is one of intimacy and jealousy, and of resentment and rivalry) with an almost Shakespearean intensity, until Jun finally tries to upstage him.

Verena Paravel and Lucien Castaing-Taylor



## filmography

Paravel and Castaing-Taylor collaborate as filmmakers in the Sensory Ethnography Laboratory. Their work seeks to conjugate art's negative capability with an ethnographic attachment to the flux of life. Their films and videos have been screened at AFI, BAFICI, Berlin, CPH:DOX, Locarno, New York, Toronto, Vienna and other film festivals. They have received theatrical distribution and been broadcast on television in the USA, Canada, UK, France, Spain, Italy, Germany, Japan, and throughout Latin America; are in the permanent collection of New York's Museum of Modern Art and the British Museum; have been exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art, the Tate, London's Institute of Contemporary Arts, the Whitney Museum, the Centre Pompidou, the Berlin Kunsthalle, the Whitechapel Gallery, and PS1; and have formed the subject of symposia at the Smithsonian Institution, the Musée du quai Branly, and the British Museum. Their works include *Canst Thou Draw Out Leviathan with a Hook?* (2012—2016), a four-part project about humanity and the sea. Their film *Leviathan* was released theatrically in 2013, and won the FIPRESCI (International Film Critics) Award of Locarno International Film Festival, the Michael Powell Award of the Edinburgh Film Festival, New Vision Award of CPH:DOX, the Silva Puma for Best Film in FICUNAM, the Los Angeles Film Critics' Circle Douglas Edwards Independent and Experimental Film Award, and sixteen other awards. Additional awards for their work include the 2013 True Vision Award, the 2013 Alpert Award in the Arts, and a Guggenheim Fellowship (2012). *Still Life/ Nature Morte* (2014) and twelve of their other moving image works were included in the 2014 Whitney Museum Biennial. Retrospectives of their work include Tokyo Image Forum (2015), Film Society of Lincoln Center (2014), Filmoteca Española (2014), and the Viennale (2013). Earlier collaborative works include *Sweetgrass* (Ilisa Barbash and Castaing-Taylor), a film that offers an unsentimental elegy at once to the American West and to the 10,000 years of uneasy accommodation between post-Paleolithic humans and animals, and *Foreign Parts* (Paravel and JP Sniadecki), a film that observes and captures the struggle of a contested "eminent domain" neighborhood before its disappearance under the capitalization of New York's urban ecology. In 2015, they completed a monumental site-specific installation, *Ah humanity!*, with Ernst Karel, a work that takes the 3/11/11 disaster as its point of departure and reflects on the fragility and folly of humanity in the Age of the Anthropocene. It has been installed at the National Archives of France in the Cour d'Honneur of the Hôtel de Soubise in Paris, as well as in Tokyo, Japan, and in Cambridge, MA, USA. Their latest works, commissioned by documenta 14, are *somniloquies* (2017) and *Commensal* (2017).



## Technical Information

a film by Verena Paravel and Lucien Castaing-Taylor

Sound : Nao Nakazawa, Verena Paravel, Lucien Castaing-Taylor

Camera and Editing : Verena Paravel, Lucien Castaing-Taylor

Picture Design : Patrick Lindenmaier

Sound Design : Bruno Ehlinger

Produced by : Valentina Novati, Verena Paravel, Lucien Castaing-Taylor

Translation : Nao Nakazawa, Maya Shiboh, Asako Fujioka, Ninako Takeuchi

90 minutes | Colour / DCP (D-Cinema)

a production : Norte Productions, S.E.L

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