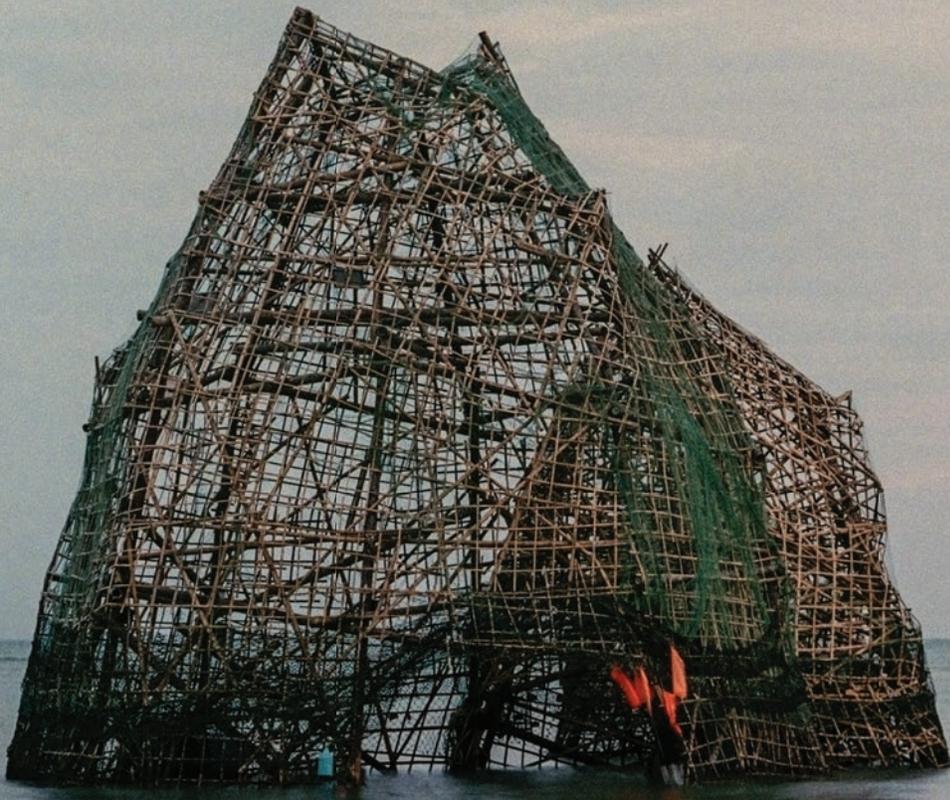


# antennae

THE JOURNAL OF NATURE IN VISUAL CULTURE

SUMMER 2021

Volume 1



uncontainable  
natures

# antennae

THE JOURNAL OF NATURE IN VISUAL CULTURE  
edited by Giovanni Aloï

*Antennae* (founded in 2006) is the international, peer reviewed, academic journal on the subject of nature in contemporary art. Its format and contents are inspired by the concepts of 'knowledge transfer' and 'widening participation'. Three times a year, the Journal brings academic knowledge within a broader arena, one including practitioners and a readership that may not regularly engage in academic discussion. Ultimately, *Antennae* encourages communication and crossovers of knowledge amongst artists, scientists, scholars, activists, curators, and students. In January 2009, the establishment of *Antennae's* Senior Academic Board, Advisory Board, and Network of Global Contributors has affirmed the journal as an indispensable research tool for the subject of environmental and nature studies. Contact the Editor in Chief at: antennaproject@gmail.com Visit our website for more info and past issues: www.antennae.org.uk

Front and back cover: MAP Office, *Ghost Island*, C-Print, 160 x 120 cm, 2018 © MAP Office

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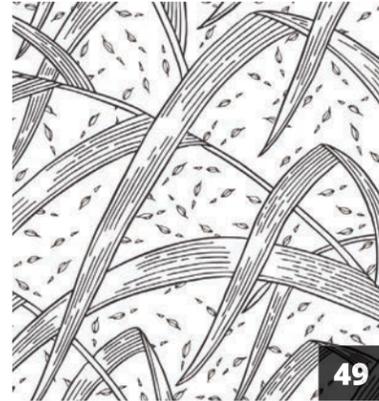


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text by **Yu-Mei Balasingamchow**

In 2015, a dead sperm whale was found floating in Singapore waters. Although the species has been sighted in Southeast Asia, this was the first such record for Singapore. The Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum recovered the carcass, studied the remains and prepared the skeleton for display.

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## Myco-fish swimming

text by **Ng Huiying**  
images by **Michelle Lai and Agnieszka Cieszanowska**

What happens when covid-time thrusts upon us a time of both deep need, and distant caring? At a time when we are collectively going inwards and discovering what we have neglected or overlooked, the quest for insight renders us teetering precariously on boundaries of visibility.



## Letters to a 19th century grain of wheat

main text by **Lucy Davis**; letters by **Marian Pastor Roces, Nguyễn Trinh Thi, Harriet Rabe von Froreich, Nils Bubandt and Anna Tsing, Faisal Husni, Marietta Radomska**

This is a selection of letters written to a wheat grain that had been found in the straw as stuffing of a 133 year dead salt water crocodile shot at the mouth of the Serangoon river in Singapore in 1888.



Right: Adele Tan  
Photo of the central platform at the roof garden of the National Gallery Singapore, hosting the nursery with plants collected from reclamation sites © Adele Tan

# editorial

Giovanni Aloï

In 2015, it was announced that *Antennae* would no longer identify as a journal primarily informed by the field of human-animal studies, but that it would situate itself more broadly across the interdisciplinary crux outlined by the controversial conception of the Anthropocene. Despite the widespread use of the term, controversy still rages about its ‘anthropos root’. The term was coined, and made popular, by biologist Eugene Storer and chemist Paul Crutzen in 2000. Its detractors claim it places the human back at the center — the main agential force on the planet. We can agree that on the surface, the act of naming a geological era after our species might smack of an anthropocentric protagonism we know far too well. So, scholars have wasted no time to forge alternatives. Jason W. Moore’s Capitalocene shines the spotlight on capitalism and highlights the unsustainability of agricultural and other extractive practices. The Plantationocene (attributed to different, undetermined sources) points at the rise of monocultures, export-oriented agricultural practices fueled by slavery, that have had an enormous impact on the ecological balance of the planet. While Donna Haraway’s tentacular speculations of the Chthulucene (from the Greek *chthonos*, meaning “of the earth”) slightly more positively point to a rearticulation of subjectivity through an “age of interconnectedness” in which ongoing multispecies stories entangle in practices of becoming-with.

Around these terms, which have gained some traction in academic circles, there exists a constellation of even more creative (or perhaps outlandish) alternatives: Oliganthropocene (Swynedouw, 2013) Anthrobcene (Parikka, 2014), Misanthropocene (Clover and Spahr, 2014) Anthro-Obscene (Swynedouw, 2014), Anglocene (Baviskar, 2015), and Eurocene (Grove, 2016).

This proliferation of names poses questions is puzzling. Is the obsession with renaming the Anthropocene a sign of disconnectedness between academia and the mainstream world where the term has been readily assimilated? As academics, we have a responsibility to drive conversations in ways that can generate discussion in the mainstream, rather than safeguard a kind of elitist territorialism that ultimately reassess a prioritization of the theoretical over the practical.

Beyond working as a wake-up call across the media, whether we like it or not, the term Anthropocene has also enabled important interdisciplinary exchanges to take place. It has at least helped many to understand that human activities have caused planetary alterations of such scale that a new geological label is warranted. It also seems clear that anthropocentrism, in the modern conception derived from the rise of Renaissance humanism, entails a hubristic value that the Anthropocene can’t inscribe. This is evidenced by the difficulty experts have faced with the placement of the so-called “golden spike”: the historical beginning of the Anthropocene. There has been no question that such a beginning should coincide with the most pervasively altering action humans have caused — rather than an overwhelmingly positive human accomplishment.

A plausible option was to position the beginning of the Anthropocene at the eighth of the industrial revolution because of the substantial carbon and methane emissions that radically changed the Earth’s atmosphere. Others saw 1945 as a much more meaningful threshold because the detonation of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki truly changed the world. Radioactive particles have since been detected in soil samples across the world. Not only has radioactivity had a global impact, but it still represents the newly acquired, horrific ability of humankind to annihilate the planet. It seems therefore very clear that the term Anthropocene inscribes the unmatched destructive power acquired by the human species. This can’t be seen as anthropocentrism simply because, in

this context, the human is unquestionably pinned as the biggest villain. If anything, the Anthropocene carries a deep sense of shame, loss, and guilt. There’s no human triumph in it — not one bit.

However, one criticism raised against the term is founded: it does not adequately place blame and responsibility upon the most prominent perpetrators of the historical and ecological crimes that have led us to today’s climate crisis and sixth mass extinction. Who is more responsible for carbon emissions and chemical pollutants and who is benefitting from the pain and deaths of others? The term Anthropocene blends in the true perpetrators with those who have already paid by losing their lands, histories, and cultures. However, the alternative terms are guilty of similar obfuscations — even the Eurocene and Anglocene lump in, generalize, and omit well beyond historical factuality. While we might be asking too much of a single word, the controversy around the term (most of which will be blissfully forgotten a hundred years from now) has helped us grapple a bit more with the inherent Eurocentrism that pervades our thinking and our production of knowledge.

The overlapping fields of the environmental humanities, posthumanism, human-animal studies, and critical plant studies still have a long way to go in order to diversify their philosophical reference points as well as truly incorporate aesthetic, material, and processual registers that do not originate, or that are not implicitly aligned, with the western tradition. Moreover, during the past ten years we have become aware that reaching beyond the comfort zone of academic research requires a committed engagement with a decolonization of our thinking.

It is in this context that *Antennae* presents a double volume entitled ‘Uncontainable Natures’ co-edited by Southeast Asia experts Kevin Chua, Lucy Davis, and Nora Taylor. The diversity, wealth, and breadth of content and perspectives gathered across the two volumes outline myriad opportunities to rethink the foundations of our practices as well as reconsider the directions of our inquiries. This project makes readily available a substantial body of work that, despite its importance and influence in Southeast Asia, remains often difficult to access in other parts of the world. It is our hope that the contributions featured in the two volumes will become staples in syllabi across the arts and humanities and that they will inform the practices of scholars and artists alike for years to come.

As always, I’d like to thank everyone involved in making these issues — from the wonderful co-editors and contributors to those who generously lent their time to peer review, proofread, and assist along the way.

**Giovanni Aloï**

Editor in Chief of *AntennaeProject*

# Uncontainable Natures: Southeast Asian ecologies and visual cultures

Co-edited by **Lucy Davis, Kevin Chua & Nora Taylor**

I heard the deminers profess *metta* for animals. *Metta* is the word for one of the four “boundless states” or “immeasurables” in Theravada Buddhism. *Metta* expresses an intersubjective emotion that deminers told me was a combination of pity and love. These deminers certainly saw this *metta* in the rats. The handlers spoke of the rats with *anet* (pity), *sralanh* (love), and *metta* (pity-love) fairly frequently. This love entangled people together. One demining supervisor, Seng, who knew English fairly well, would dismiss my questions as easy to answer. He shook his head when I told him *metta* confused me.

“*Metta* is easy to understand. *Metta* means, ‘I’m sorry, you’re sorry.’” As he said this, he gestured a spread hand in the air between us — indicating himself with the *I* and me with the *you*. To his dismay, this confused me all the more.

“You mean at the same time?”

“Yes, yes. I’m sorry you’re sorry. I forgive you, you forgive me”. Seng conflated subject and object nouns explicitly with *metta* by saying: “*Metta* means I’m sorry, you’re sorry”. His repetition of the sorry with “I” or “you” suggested the interchangeability of the “I” and the “you”.

What does it mean when on the minefield two major emotional sentiments, fear and love, are expressed with ambiguous subjects and objects...

We begin these two volumes of *Antennae* with a quote from a contributor, Darcie DeAngelo, whose essay is found in Volume Two. A series of complex transformations evolve from encounters between Cambodian deminer-humans and Tanzania-trained mine-detection rats, in a landscape marked by Cold War geopolitics and made-in-China land mines.

This surprising interspecies entanglement destabilises dualisms between humans and nonhumans, subjects and objects, military rationality, and emotional affiliations—which resonates with our editorial approach and exploration of the ecologies of Southeast Asia as politically and epistemologically uncontainable, ungovernable, and irreducible.

DeAngelo’s insights into the immeasurable affective work carried out by migrant mine-detection rats suggest a potent example of *uncontainment*. “Containment” refers to the spatiotemporal ordering — whether perspectival realism/geometric space or linear time — that has characterized modernity. This includes separation of nature and culture has undergirded ecological politics in Southeast Asia the late twentieth century. Modern warfare, and the ethos of militarism that continues it, are both forms of extraction that destroy human societies and consume vast amounts of resources while defining whole environments—forests,

beaches, seas, mountain ranges—as contained theatres of military activity, which suffer ecological repercussions for decades after the actual event. The African giant pouched rats (*Cricetomys gambianus*) not only open up Cambodian landscapes that were previously confined by militaristic logics and land mines; in their collaborations with humans, they also transform the ethos of demining practices and the affective registers of human-nonhuman relationships. In this, the mine-detection rats join other confederations of creatures, artefacts, or situations that entangle and unbind more-than-human relations and manifest new possibilities for a post-extractive world.

‘Uncontainable Natures’ gathers thirty-two articles, including artistic contributions, interviews, fiction, and academic essays that contest the extractive regimes and logics of containment that have re-emerged in Southeast Asia since the 1970s in which a recursion of colonialism has brought an evacuated and homogenised image of nature in tow. The two volumes have been organized into themed sections that reflect the compelling and provocative responses of our contributors to the questions we are asking about the dynamics of containment/uncontainment.

While we and our contributors have taken care to highlight key precedents, art-historical trajectories, artists, and institutions that contribute to a currently flourishing arena of art and ecology in theory and practice in Southeast Asia, these volumes cannot possibly offer a fully representative and comprehensive survey of all such initiatives and inspirations from across the region. We also recognise that Southeast Asia is connected as much by artist-artist networks as it is by geopolitical boundaries and shared ecological experiences. It is moreover important to acknowledge that although several of our networks and contributors utilise or engage with regional languages other than English, these volumes are written in the English language and have mostly relied on English-language sources and translations. For better or worse, English has been the filter through which we have engaged with the diversity of Southeast Asian cultures.

The three editors of these volumes hail from or have lifelong connections to Southeast Asia: Kevin Chua, Associate Professor of Art History at Texas Tech University, USA is a Historian of European and Southeast Asian Art. Lucy Davis, Professor of Artistic Practices at ViCCA Visual Cultures, Curating and Contemporary Art Aalto University, Helsinki, Finland is visual artist, art writer, and founder of the Southeast Asia-situated Migrant Ecologies Project. Nora Taylor is Professor of South and Southeast Asian Art at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, USA.

These positions impact the scope of this volume: Chua and Davis, long-term residents of Singapore bring to this publication an awareness of and ongoing engagement with contemporary politics, ecologists, cultural theorists, and artists throughout archipelagic Southeast Asia. They are also importantly aware of the persistent neo-colonial relationship that economically powerful Singapore and its institutions have to the region’s natural resources, economies as well as cultures and artworks. Taylor, as specialist and frequent resident of Vietnam, with deep connections to the art community there, understands the struggles of indigenous people during phases of colonial and American occupation. Taylor is also aware of the historic influence of the Communist Party on Vietnamese art and culture, and the practices of censorship that continue to impact the development of and discourse on contemporary art.

While we and our contributors have taken care to list key precedents, art-historical trajectories, artists, and institutions that contribute to a currently flourishing arena of art and ecology in theory and practice in Southeast Asia, these volumes do not propose to offer a representative and comprehensive geographical survey. We recognise that Southeast Asia

is connected as much by artist-artist and independent intellectual networks as it is by geopolitical boundaries and shared ecological experiences. It is moreover important to acknowledge that although several of our networks and contributors utilise or engage with regional languages other than English, these volumes are written in the English language and have mostly relied on English-language sources and translations. For better or worse, English has been the filter through which we have engaged with the diversity of Southeast Asian cultures.

All three editors acknowledge the presence of indigenous populations in all Southeast Asian countries, the violence that has been and continues to be done to them with colonialism and its often neoliberal aftermath, and the need to resist speaking for them. Even as we ally ourselves with these populations by advocating for the “decolonial”, we are aware that decoloniality means different things in each context and acknowledge the possibility that colonialism can never be fully excised from our institutions, lives, and minds.

These volumes emerged from a series of questions pertaining to dynamics of containment and uncontainment that we asked ourselves as artists and writers, including the following: In what ways has the current ecological crisis brought about new, porous understandings of the entanglements of nature and culture in the Southeast Asian region? How have artists thought and practiced in interconnected lifeworlds, via an engagement with regional geographies, cultures, and histories? How have artists and exhibitions critically engaged anthropocentric tropes of colonial natural history or modern representations of the natural world and nonhuman actors intervened in or subverted modern orders of representation? What are the ways in which they have drawn on vernacular animisms or investigated the colonial production of “nature” to create an eco-politics of the present? And how do nonhuman agents or spirit ecologies animate contemporary art practices?

Across Southeast Asia, technological “fixes” to environmental problems have reinstalled human centrality by scaling the universe to the human. Pushing against this ever-recurring spectre of anthropocentrism, we ask for more searching reconfigurations of the nature/culture and human/nonhuman divides, and deeper critiques of extraction (extraction, to wit, is fully part of ecology). How have artists working with biology and new technologies in Southeast Asia troubled anthropocentric hubris, expanding our understanding of what it means to be “human”?

By foregrounding the uncontainable, we do not simply wish to reaffirm that colonialism and modernity in Southeast Asia used, appropriated or instrumentalised nature. We do not wish to tell stories solely from the point of view of extractivism. Nor do we wish to illuminate the ecological basis or underpinnings of colonialism or modernity, which would be to write a form of environmental history. We are interested, rather, in how critical, variegated visual-cultural ecologies can speak to the containing natures that lurk in contemporary (neo-)colonialisms. More than an analysis of nature as metaphor in Southeast Asia, we aim to uncover the specific politics of nature-culture assemblages across the region.

### Cover and Contents

The cover of *Uncontainable Natures* Volume One features *Ghost Island*, MAP Office’s installation woven of salvaged ghost nets. Ghost nets are nets made of non-biodegradable, synthetic fibres that have been lost or deliberately left in the ocean and which cause tremendous destruction to global marine life. We selected this image because of its ambivalent relationship to our theme of containment: on the one hand, these delicate structures are unable to control either sand or sea and echo the small islands that surround them that were devastated by the tsunami that followed the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake. On the other, abandoned nets are themselves an uncontrollable, proliferating presence in our oceans.

The first volume is organized thematically:

**Spirit Ecologies** considers the multifariousness of local or situated spiritualisms and their attendant ecologies. More than an acknowledgment of the spiritual dimension to all issues concerning the environment, what we call “Spirit Ecologies” uncovers the ecological conditions of the spirit world, and considers agencies on both sides of the human/nonhuman divide. The section considers Nāga cosmoeologies in Thailand, the natural-cultural entanglement of Keramat graves in Singapore, spirit manifestations in the midst of accelerating climate change in a seaside town in Malaysia, the forest at the intersection of human, nonhuman, and planetary temporalities in Vietnam, and how everyday animisms and spirit worship leak into appropriations of Cold War visual cultural technologies in the extended materialities, practices and ecologies of Southeast Asian cinema.

**Earthly Entanglements** examines the processes by which plants and trees intervene in human worlds and co-formulate languages of the archipelago that encompasses Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia, the ecological politics of land reclamation and the sand trade in and around Singapore, and riverine ecologies along the Mekong river.

**Marine Ecologies** investigates ecological devastation, economic adversity, and state policy via one fishing community in Krabi National Park, Thailand; and questions the sustainability of an art biennale at the coastal town of Krabi in the wake of the 2004 tsunami. A politics of embodiment runs through a story of a washed-up, decomposing sperm whale; while, in another speculative essay, myco-fish traverse the human-animal divide, following “stream[s] of consciousness [which] sparkle in the currents of thought” of their human hosts. A final set of artist pages regards taxidermic beings as hosts of worlds that spill out through their seams, in and through multiple pasts, futures, and continents.

We are indebted to the *Antennae* editorial board for their invitation to oversee these two volumes dedicated to art and ecology in Southeast Asia and to anonymous reviewers for their feedback on the thirty-two contributions we have collated here. We thank our contributors for trusting us with their exciting considerations and visionary perspectives, and for everyone’s patience and understanding during this past pandemic year.

**Kevin Chua** is Associate Professor of 18th- and 19th-century European and Southeast Asian art at Texas Tech University, USA. He specializes in the history of 18th and 19th-century European art, with an emphasis on French painting. Chua obtained a PhD in the History of Art from the University of California at Berkeley, and has held fellowships at the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts (CASVA) in Washington, DC, and at the Center for 17th- and 18th- century Studies at the University of California at Los Angeles. He has published essays on Greuze, Girodet, David, and the Bavarian Rococo. Chua also writes on modern and contemporary art in Southeast Asia, and has published essays on Simryn Gill, Ho Tzu Nyen, Charles Lim, the Migrant Ecologies Project, 1950s Nanyang painting, and Sudjojono. He has published in *Art History*, *Representations*, *Art Journal*, *Third Text*, and *Artforum*.

**Lucy Davis** is a visual artist, art writer and founder of the collaborative, transdisciplinary The Migrant Ecologies Project (MEP) which encircles more than human ecologies, materiality and memory in art and culture — primarily but not exclusively in Southeast Asia. [www.migrantecologies.org](http://www.migrantecologies.org) Lucy was forced to leave Singapore in 2016 after to a government intervention in her employment status. She is currently Professor of Artistic Practices in the MA Programme in Visual Cultures, Curating and Contemporary Art at Aalto University, Finland. Davis was Founding Editor and Editor in Chief of the Singapore critical publication series *FOCAS Forum on Contemporary Art & Society* from 2000-2007.

**Nora Annesley Taylor** is the Alsdorf Professor of South and Southeast Asian Art at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She is the author of *Painters in Hanoi: An Ethnography of Vietnamese Art* (Hawaii: 2004, reprinted National University of Singapore Press: 2009), co-editor of *Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art, An Anthology* (Cornell SEAP Press 2012) and numerous essays on Modern and Contemporary Vietnamese and Southeast Asian Art. She is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship award (2013). She was curator of *12,576.3 Breathing is Free: New Work by Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba* (SAIC 2010) and *Changing Identity: Recent Work by Women Artists from Vietnam* (International Arts and Artists, multiple venues 2007-2008).



spirit  
ecologies



# The rise of the nāgas: Cosmoecologies of salvation in Northeastern Thailand

*Ritual activities around the mythical and ophidian figure of the Nāga have blossomed in recent years in Thailand as the kingdom endures a political and economic crisis combined with growing climatic hazards. In order to show how the Nāgas' ambiguous ontology embodies a force of resistance to an insatiable mode of development, I shall engage the depths of Nāga's existentiality, and the different ways these so called mythical animals are present in the everyday landscape, ritual techniques and/or artifacts, people. At the crossroads of cryptozoology, archeology, speleology and rituality, I propose a visual analysis of the sensory anchors of the magnifying Nāga cosmoecologies at the limit of pure potentialities — from their omnipresence as an icon to the ephemerality and scarcity of their epiphanies.*

text and images by **Stéphane Rennesson**

**N**āgas are those magnificent, often multi-headed, half-dragon, half serpent beings ubiquitously (re)present(ed) in Buddhist temples around the world. Nāgas are painted large or small in an array of colours on walls. Nāgas are sculpted in wood, stone, or gems, made of banana tree folded leaves and stand independently or, more than often, their serpentine body follows the handrails of a staircase.

Nāgas are intended to impress observers, be they human devotees, tourists, or spirits. And of late the cult to this ophidian deity has developed dramatically in Buddhist mainland Southeast Asia, with worship in Thailand, gaining momentum in the last decade, notably in the North and Northeastern parts of the kingdom where Nāgas worship also has a long and deep cultural history. At the same time, the kingdom has been going through a political crisis as the chosen economic model has begun to weigh excessively on disempowered people and exhausted soils alike. At the intersection of Theravada Buddhism and beliefs in a spirited landscape I shall, in this short piece, provide a few insights into the various ways that Nāgas interweave with human worlds and people's lives up to the point of ontologic confusion, and in such a way that challenges modern classical dualisms such as nature/culture, human/animal, matter/spirit to name a few, all of which are rooted in an impossibility to think a future not *with* but from *within* our environment. In the following, I offer a few insights into Nāga cults and suggest how these promise a fertile collection of strategies of empowerment for devotees as well as possibilities for the re-situating of human lives within ecological contexts.

Although the presence of Nāgas preceded the rise of The Enlightened One's teachings in the regional spiritual economy, they are currently first of all considered to be protectors of the Buddha and Buddhism. The Nāga has also secured its position within two stories connected to the historical Buddha, Siddharta Gautama. *Muchalinda* is the name of a Nāga who protected the Buddha from the elements and other hazards after his enlightenment. The iconic image

## **Stéphane Rennesson**

*The trance movements of a worshipper possessed by a Nāga. Photo editing by Bertrand Bayet*  
p.14-15 *A characteristic stance of Nāga worshipping dances (during a devotional ceremony in Udon Thani), 2018*  
© Stéphane Rennesson



Stéphane Rennesson

The trace of a crawling Nāga on red sandstone. Photo editing by Bertrand Bayet © Stéphane Rennesson

of Buddha meditating under the flattened neck of a gigantic Nāga-like snake has spread beyond the realm of the Buddhist rituality in the popular culture.

Nāgas are primarily worshipped because they preside over the water movements from the underworld where they established kingdoms parallel and quite similar to the human realm on the surface. The presence of the Nāga, be they male or female, is also attested by natural wells, water sources in general, and caves that stand out on the landscape. The image above and the one on the following page depict Nāga portals through which the Nāgas are supposed to go back and forth from their underworld to the surface. They are renowned for controlling water movements, notably in North and Northeastern Thailand where some Prince Nāga are believed to have designed river beds and other ponds and swamps. In the agrarian ritual cycle of the region, Nāgas are called upon both to make contact with the sky deities to ease the rain falling and to preside personally over the convenient flowing of waters and hence the rotation of the seasons. Nāgas are thus also called upon for rites related to the fertility of the soil.

Nāgas embody a kind of life force that flows through the earth, water, and air. This ontological versatility of the Nāgas has evolved from its ambiguous placement in the local, Buddhist-influenced cosmology. According to the *Traiphum* (The Three Worlds book) for instance, the Buddhist worldview is best depicted as a mountain that symbolizes a series of subtle differences in terms of spiritual achievement which are organized hierarchically with the Enlightened One situated above the numerous grades of deities. Worldly creatures such as humans are situated on the next level down and then come to the ghosts and



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A Nāga portal in the rainy season in a private worshiping place. Photo editing by Bertrand Bayet



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A Nāga portal in the rainy season in a private worshiping place. Photo editing by Bertrand Bayet

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*Beyond more prosaic calls for prosperity, recognition or perhaps winning the next national lottery draw, Nāgas are therefore also worshipped as a potential shortcut in the hierarchy of beings and order of things.*  
 .....

other monsters on the borders of the hells and within. Everything appears to be neatly ordered and in its assigned place. However, if we consider the beings that encircle my research, there can be a doubt, a mystery, and the possibility of all not being what it seems. Not only are Nāgas able to visit each stratum as “messengers”, they existentially challenge all of the aforementioned ontological categories.

What is more, Nāgas can take on the appearance of whichever living being they so wish. When tracing the myths and the stories of strange encounters related by devotees, Nāgas mostly borrow the outfit of a snake, a squirrel, or a human being. In an only partially successful attempt at boundary maintenance, a Prince Nāga who was willing to be ordained as a Buddhist monk was denied this right by the Buddha himself because of his “animal” nature! However, in order to recognize and celebrate the Nāga’s goodwill, the Buddha decided that from that moment on, every human that is to be ordained as a monk should be called “Nāga” (*Nak*). This story is interesting in at least two aspects: first of all, it highlights the capacity of the Nāga to embody the spiritual progress that is sought after in Buddhist philosophy. Secondly, more confusingly, Nāgas are both considered as a non-reflexive animal (*derachan*), logically inferior to human beings, and as a kind of deity (*devachan*) that has mighty raw powers over sustaining life and the protection of Buddhism. Beyond more prosaic calls for prosperity, recognition or perhaps winning the next national lottery draw, Nāgas are therefore also worshipped as a potential shortcut in the hierarchy of beings and order of things.

Nāgas are of course also subject to a whole range of anthropomorphic projections. The underworld (*muang badaan*) of Nāgas is in some way seen to be a mirror to our own. Nāgas also have a social hierarchy, a political

organization quite comparable to that of humans. They are said in some legends to be our cousins and to be the providers of brides for human Princes. They are also in this way a means to seal relationships between the Lords of the two worlds. In other ritual contexts, the uncertainty that characterizes Nāgas has also primarily a phenomenological dimension. They are at once ubiquitous, yet difficult to engage with perceptively as they crawl, swim and fly surreptitiously from one state, realm, element to another. Considering the modes of presence of the Nāgas, I have been constantly struck by the proliferation of equivocal signals in the landscape, on the body, and in the mind of believers. Nāgas appear in dreams and can be seen as fleeting apparitions, leaving traces on the ground, on rocks as seen on the image above. They can “possess” a medium or simply deliver messages by thought transfer (telepathy). Their presence can by turns enhance the growth of trees or set off the existence of a supposedly endemic taxon in the vegetal realm. One example of the Nāga presence is upon a common fig tree (*Ficus carica*) that had not only grown huge but had also decided to fall the very day of the late King Rama IX’s cremation in 2017. Another example is a supposedly endemic species of palm trees with scales on the trunk, that is named after the only place where they are said to grow. Both of these examples are to be found in the vicinity of a main Nāga portal in Northeastern Thailand as seen in the image on the next page.

Only a few manifestations of Nāgas are observable at large. One can think of the iconic architectural representations that can be witnessed by anyone in Buddhist Temples. There are also, of course, the famous Nāga red fireballs, those mysterious red-colored lights that rise from the Mekong River in Nong Khai and Bueng Khan Provinces every year on the full-moon night at the end of the Buddhist three month annual retreat which comes at the end of the rainy season.



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*A giant common fig tree is said to be inhabited and sacred.* Photo editing by Bertrand Bayet

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*Two mediums watch over a possession ceremony.* Photo editing by Bertrand Bayet © Stéphane Rennesson



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*The subtle circulation of Nāga's energy in a collective or shared "possession".* Photo editing by Bertrand Bayet © Stéphane Rennesson

However, the majority of Nāgas can only be seen or heard or experienced by a few "special people" who can connect with them because of an extraordinary sensibility or level of moral achievement. Others may be able to connect as they have themselves been a Nāga in one or a few previous lives. Mediums thus talk about themselves via an intricately enmeshed series of correspondences between events punctuating their own biographies and the symbolic, mythical, and ontological features of the Nāga. For example, this officiant's hair, a kind of dreadlock, ends with the shape of a nine-headed Nāga with which she blesses the ground in the name of the local Nāga as seen above. This is the result of her proximity or contiguity with Nāgas and the hair is one of her main tools to connect with them. An even more efficient way to amplify the presence and the impact of Nāgas in this world is when a medium helps others to intimately experience the existence of their predecessors.

Mediums, therefore, develop rituals where they transmit the force of their "master" (*khruu, guru* in Sanskrit), where "master" refers to a specific Nāga. For example, a medium might direct the raw force of the Nāga into their disciples who can thus collectively experience the uncontrollable power of their moral guide. The image on the right depicts the subtle circulation of Nāga's energy in a shared "possession". In another transmission ritual, some mediums who are also classical dancers not only perform during rituals themselves but also teach their followers specific dances intended to imitate serpentine moves. The dance can be a means to drive followers into another trance state.

If the syntax of analogic correspondences also draws in the iconography that is present in sacred areas such as temples, what I am trying to sug

gest here is that the indexical manifestations of the Nāga in the landscape and in the human psychomotricity and bodily adornments are much more crucial in the anchoring of Nāgas as a key actor of the local cosmoecology. Landmarks such as Nāga Portals suggest extra-ordinary past phenomena, as the possibility for a new epiphany or miraculous intervention of Nāgas. Human artistic/ritualistic prowess also mimics the ontology of these ophidian deities and constitutes the best offerings as much as the best evidence and tools for devotion and connectivity.

The presence of mediums conducting devotional ceremonies for Nāgas in Buddhist temples might be explained in terms of efficiency in the distribution of force (*Phalang*), or moral force (*Barami*) in its refined and purified form when framed in a Buddhist ritual context. Mediums act like transmitters of ecological energy. They are part of a circuit and assist as a conduit for the channelling of the power of the Nāga as well as the devotion of pilgrims in two directions.

Finally, and most importantly for this essay, in times of environmental, political, and economic uncertainties, all of which are taking their toll on the land and waters, people call upon the Nāga's moral exemplarity for spiritual guidance, and they actively contribute to the spreading of the Dharmic Law and the ordering of a monadic world. The environmental affordances scattered in the landscape that upholds the cult of Nāga map the potential bountifulness of societies that reclaim a say in local economics. Politicians at every level of the administrative divisions are very aware of the potential and try to get involved by sponsoring ceremonies if not infrastructures. The most well-known intervention of politicians in Nāga cults is the promotion of the Nāga fireballs festival of Nong Khai by the governor of the province. The event developed from a small, discreet



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*The subtle circulation of Nāga's energy in a collective or shared "possession".* Photo editing by Bertrand Bayet

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homage to local Nāgas to a national event that attracts hundreds of thousands of people from the whole kingdom along the right bank of the Mekong and that became a landmark of Northeastern culture. A Nāga is also the main element of the logo of the Royal Irrigation Department which presides to the management of water. But the latter is more a tool in the hands of substantial interest than the sponsor of a hypothetic ecological revolution! This is also often the case when it comes to Buddhist Temples that find in the Nāga cult a means to revitalize their attractivity. Competition between important temples to attract devotees and their money can be fierce and the presence of a miracle, a medium, etc. connected to the presence of a Nāga can be decisive, especially given the legitimacy crisis the traditional monkhood is going through for a few years. More than ever monks and temples are regarded as being at least as concerned with their own reputation and wealth as with the moral guidance and the well-being of the lay community. It's thus not surprising that cults of various deities, among which Nāgas take the lion's share, develop dramatically and that Buddhist institutions try to channel the phenomenon as it has always been the case.

I admittedly ran into a few local initiatives where the figure of Nāga is explicitly handled as a symbol and/or an explicit driving force for the enforcement of an ecological development model. I think here of an academic in agronomy setting up an association for promoting macrobiotic agriculture patronized by a Nāga dwelling in his garden. Although Nāgas are more than often involved in monadic logics where political ecology arguments are perhaps only implicit, they are nonetheless quite powerful. Women, who are barred from monkhood because of a non-ending paternalistic tropism, find here prospects for assuming ritual responsibilities. Transgendered people, (mostly male to female) are also significantly overrepresented. Nāga cults, therefore, manifest a strong integrative potential not only in kind but also in terms of gender, with the potential to draw in eco-socio-spiritual potencies beyond the usual mature male human referent. Nāgas' ecologies

are therefore concerned with giving space to people whose gender is equivocal as they are entities whose ambiguous materiality is subject to questioning. As a field of potencies, Nāgas represent a transformative force; the very fuel of a restorative ecological process that drives the whole cosmos, indeed a kind of "re-enchantment". Whatever the metaphorical or metonymical dimension one may attribute to the empowerment these cults provide, Nāgas are circulating among the elements and as such uphold a contemporary matrix to think if not to act upon individual and collective destinies.

**Endnotes**

[1] Stanley J. Tambiah, *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-east Thailand* (London, Cambridge University Press, 1970); Bernard Formoso, "Le prince-serpent, ou l'impossible métamorphose: malemort, royauté et autochtonie chez les Lao et les Tai Lü", *Archives de Science sociales des religions*, 119 (2002), 127-145.

[2] I borrow here the expression of Tim Ingold and his phenomenologic understanding of human perception. He argues that we develop our perceptive skills not in response to an external and material environment as cultural agents but as belonging to the world and therefore being totally engaged in ecological logics that can't be reduced to "natural" phenomena (*The Perception of the Environment. Essays on livelihood, dwelling, and skills* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011).

[3] Sumset Jumsai, *Naga, Cultural Origin in Siam and the West Pacific*, (Singapore, Oxford University Press, 1989).

[4] The book of the three worlds (Heavens-Earth-Subterranean) written in the 13th century tells the story of the world's creation and functioning. It has been translated into English by F.E. Reynolds and M.B. Reynolds, *Three Worlds according to King Ruang: A Thai Buddhist cosmology* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, Berkeley Buddhist Studies, 1982).

[5] If the Temple of Kamchanod is widely renowned to host a specific kind of palm tree, the *chanod* tree who is now famous all over Thailand, biologists tend to identify those trees as *Livistona saribus* (taraw palm) well known in Southeast Asia.

[6] The origin of this phenomenon is subject to controversy. When believers see them as a manifestation of Nāgas dwelling in the Mekong, others attribute their existence to either a natural phenomenon (flammable gas produce in marshy areas) or to the trickery of Lao people who would play with fireworks or with flare guns from the other bank of the river to take advantage on Thai

credulity! The controversy is narrated rather loosely in a Thai so-called documentary film directed by Jira Maligoolin in 2002: *Mekhong Full Moon Party* (15 ค่ำเดือน 11).

[7] I refer here to a previous analysis of beetle fighting games in Northern Thailand (Stéphane Rennesson, "Wrestling Beetles and Ecological Wisdom: How Insects Contribute to the Cosmopolitics of Northern Thailand", *Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol.8, No. 1 (April 2019), 3-24. Building notably on Paul Mus seminal work that underlined the importance of the earth as a major pool of symbolic resources in Southeast Asia (Paul Mus, "Cultes indiens et indigènes au Champa [Indian and autochtone cults in Champa]", *BEFEO* 33-1 (1933), 367-410), I brought to light the channeling of a kind raw force stemming from the soil by the human players of the elaborated playful device.

[8] The concept of "affordance" is used here as it was coined by James J. Gibson (*The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979)).

[9] I refer to the book to be published in the coming months by NIAS Press and edited by Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière and Peter Jackson: *A World Ever More Enchanted. Efflorescing Spirit Cults in Buddhist Southeast Asia*[1].

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# The keramat grave on the green hill by the sea

*Keramat graves may be found in many parts of the Malay world, often Malay or Muslim graves of significant and holy persons which have become shrines. This article examines the relationship between these keramat graves and their location, with a focus on trees, heights and their proximity to water. In doing so, it will show how the sacredness of the features of these locations support and validate keramat grave worship and veneration, while these graves aid in the continuance of the veneration of trees, hills and water through the practice of keramat grave worship and veneration.*

text by **Faisal Husni**

**K**eramat Kusu Island sits at the top of a hill, on an off-shore island of Singapore. The ascent up to it claims necessary sweat, air from lungs, and energy, from even the healthiest. I've made the climb countless times and still haven't gotten used to that. It is a triumvirate of *keramat* graves of Syed Abdul Rahman, his mother (Nenek Ghalib), and his sister, (Puteri Fatimah Shariffah).<sup>1</sup> Syed Abdul Rahman was an ascetic and a *wali* believed to have died on the island in 1816.<sup>2</sup> Worshippers and devotees, even from China and Thailand, come to these graves presenting offerings in all forms. The graves sit protected by a shelter of concrete, wood, zinc, and yellow; thick with the spicy smell of incense. Beyond the bright yellow walls, an army of trees surrounds the shrine, all the way down to the foot of the hill. And upon them, offerings of yellow ribbons and bags of stones make living altars out of them.

Scribbled wishes populate the yellow façade of the shrine. Wishes for money, a baby, a cure to the incurable; anything you can think of. These wishes, like vines, have crept down the railings and the steps leading up to the summit. They are still creeping down. Every wish, every hope, written in black felt pen, claims more and more of the hill for Keramat Kusu Island.

Sometimes, while up there, I would close my eyes and let the air whisper to me. And just beyond the greens and the yellows, I'll hear the ocean breathe.

*Keramat*<sup>3</sup> graves like Keramat Kusu Island, may be found in many parts of the Malay World;<sup>4</sup> from the *keramat* graves of the Wali Songo<sup>5</sup> in Java to Keramat Datuk Machap in Malacca. They are venerated graves that have ascended to sites of worship or veneration, or shrines, embracing hopeful devotees who approach them asking for the miraculous and wishing hefty wishes ranging from health and fertility to money and love. They are often the graves of Muslim saint-like figure or *wali* (plural, *awliya*)<sup>6</sup> and their veneration and worship are part of the larger tradition of Islamic grave worship found in many parts of the world.<sup>7</sup> Graves of other groups of individuals have also been considered as *keramat* graves. The *keramat* graves in Singapore—the concern of this essay—for example, include graves of many other different individuals, including royalties,<sup>8</sup> community leaders,<sup>9</sup> individuals who have suffered violent deaths or martyrs,<sup>10</sup>



Faisal Husni

*Keramat Kusu Island at Kusu Island, 2017 © Faisal Husni*

and even individuals with miraculous corpses.<sup>11</sup>

Sadly, many *keramat* graves in Singapore have been removed or destroyed over the years, uprooted from their sacred grounds. Keramat Kusu Island is one of the few surviving ones. The first time I visited it, legs angry from the climb, I carried with me the certainty that the experience of *keramat* grave veneration and worship, was determined largely—if not only—by a singular object: the grave; and that its presence at the location made the space sacred; nothing else. The realisation that I was wrong whispered to me while I whispered a prayer of Al-fatiha to the first grave, when I became fully aware of the continuous prayers of the ocean, beneath those of the worshippers and the devotees. And that realisation turned me, and all I saw beyond the wooden beams and pillars of the shelter were giant trees and their leaves. These plants had isolated the place. I felt a little ashamed for not seeing them before—really seeing them—and what they contributed to the space and the experience of *keramat* grave worship and veneration.

In his study of *keramat* graves across Java, Henri Chambert-Loir discovered that often, these *keramat* graves existed or are built upon pre-existing sacred spaces or grounds. These spaces may contain large trees that are culturally believed to be sacred or natural occurring features that are viewed as “a manifestation of the supernatural world”.<sup>12</sup> Sometimes, these graves may have been built on historical and religious sites, such as ancient palaces or, Hindu or Buddhist temple grounds. The worship of the *keramat* graves in these spaces allowed for a continuation of the veneration of these sacred spaces through a different form, sustaining the relevance of these spaces to

current worshippers. “The power of the place is still revered but somehow legitimised by the veneration of a Muslim grave [*keramat* grave]”.<sup>13</sup> Trees, hills, water; these features of the land may be viewed as sacred by many ethnic and religious communities, and are found at or near many of the locations that Singapore *keramat* graves sit upon. The question then would be, how do these features and their sacredness contribute to veneration and worship of *keramat* graves?

### Keramat Graves and their Communities

It has been suggested that a neat layering of three belief systems, that have at one point or another been important to the Malay world, is responsible for the forming of *keramat* grave veneration and worship; they are animism, Hinduism, and of course, Islam.<sup>14</sup> Tidy as this might be, it is problematic. It makes the assumption that the Malay culture—and all its earlier belief systems—are the sole contributors to this tradition. Even if they were at some point, they have ceased to be the only contributors. *Keramat* grave worship and veneration is a complex, messy amalgamation of the above-mentioned belief systems and all the beliefs and cultures of the different communities of people that worship it. In Singapore, *keramat* graves are worshipped and venerated by Malays, Chinese, Indians, Muslims, Buddhists, Taoists, just to name a few. This beautifully reflects the diversity of Singapore’s population. And we still have to consider the devotees and visitors that these graves receive from other countries.<sup>15</sup> *Keramat* grave worship and veneration are also practices without religious doctrine or texts dictating the proper way to approach these shrines. Without such religious instructions, worshippers and devotees of *keramat* graves bring with them, to these graves, approaches, and tools of worship already established in their own culture and beliefs, adopting these approaches for their *keramat* grave worship and veneration.<sup>16</sup> This allows for people of different religions to come together in a single space. Practices and approaches to *keramat* grave worship and veneration may even vary from *keramat* grave to *keramat* grave, even within Singapore.<sup>17</sup> Though their practices have become localised and infused with so many beliefs and cultures, *keramat* graves have managed to distinguish themselves from other examples within the larger tradition of Islamic grave or tomb worship.

All these cultures and communities interact with the *keramat* graves—each independent, yet also at times, influencing each other. In order to study this subject, I borrow Richard Davis’ approach in *Lives of Indian Images*.<sup>18</sup> Building upon scholars like Igor Kopytoff,<sup>19</sup> Davis considers objects and art as things with lives and biographies; a methodology that I adopt in my own research. *Keramat* graves undoubtedly have lives. They are born (created upon a death), go through changes over time, and can be destroyed (through exhumation and demolition). There are stories of *keramat* graves being moved<sup>20</sup> and stories of *keramat* graves standing resolute despite attempts at uprooting them.<sup>21</sup> However, Davis’ most important contribution is in addressing and studying the different communities with which an object may come into contact throughout its life. His view is that the identity of an object is neither singular nor fixed upon the point of fabrication or creation, but instead is made and remade through interactions with humans or communities with different approaches and beliefs—these different communities he calls “communities of response”.<sup>22</sup> Approaching the different communities of worshippers and visitors of a *keramat* grave as different “communities of response” has proven valuable in my efforts to understand the significance—especially the symbolic significance—of the features of *keramat* grave locations in Singapore as these features work to support—and maybe even validate—the sacredness of the *keramat* graves and their worship.

However, the main focus of this essay isn’t the people, or even the graves—though, of course, they are undeniably essential to the *keramat* grave tradition. The attention here is on the location of the *keramat* graves. For the



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Exterior of Keramat Habib Nuh at Mount Palmer, 2017 © Faisal Husni



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Keramat Sharifah Rogayah at Duxton Plain Park, 2018 © Faisal Husni

worshippers and devotees to be able to react to these spaces—whether or not influenced by cultural values of sacredness—the features of these locations (specifically, the trees, the hills, and the water) must first act, function, move, grow, exist and simply be. And we’ll explore how these acts—their acts—happen and manifest.

### Trees and Living Altars

The ascent up the hill to Keramat Kusu Island is a climb through towering sentinels of wood and green, with limbs branching in all directions. Worshippers and devotees are confronted by the scent of trees before they are embraced by the perfume of incense within the shelter of the graves. Keramat graves such as Keramat Sharifah Rogayah<sup>23</sup> rest beside trees, bestowing some shade to those who approach it. Keramat Bukit Kasita—which is not a single grave but a small cemetery of individual *keramat* graves<sup>24</sup>—have trees gripping upon and rising massively from the walls of its compounds. And within this space, between the tessellations of graves, a few trees have broken through the ground and grown tall. Trees are part of the sacred experience of the *keramat* grave tradition and they can overwhelm you. They affect the sacredness of the space and need to be considered when studying the materiality and sacredness of these sites.

The Malay belief in the *semangat*, or soul substance, asserts that almost everything, including plants and trees, has *semangat*.<sup>25</sup> This belief allowed for trees to be used in many earlier spiritual practices of the Malay peoples.<sup>26</sup> Sometimes, trees themselves may also be *keramat* and are believed to be able to bring blessings and miracles. Within these earlier Malay beliefs, certain trees are

thought to serve as homes of spirits and ghosts;<sup>28</sup> a reason Chambert-Loir offers as to why trees are viewed as sacred, and why a space with a *keramat* grave may be “marked by the presence of a big tree”.<sup>29</sup> Trees have also played vital roles in the lives of the individuals whose graves we now view as *keramat* graves. I had a wonderful chat with the caretaker of Keramat Kusu Island during one of my trips there. He was enjoying a cloudy day and an afternoon fishing when I interrupted him. He told me that the *wali*, Syed Abdul Rahman, used to scale the forested hill of the island to meditate or *bertapa*. Two thoughts pounced at me after the conversation. The first was a question: Do *awliya* sweat and pant as us regular folks do when they climb that high? Maybe not. The second and more importantly: Such a space—among trees or within forests—is sacred, where a spiritual, and possibly ascetic, act could be performed. And with trees being filled with power and *semangat*, can you imagine how further charged with sacredness a space such as a *keramat* grave would be when surrounded by them?

Trees have also made themselves important to the other cultures and religions of peoples who visit *keramat* graves. The veneration of trees in the numerous cultural and religious backgrounds of worshippers and devotees of *keramat* graves could have amplified the significance of those found at or near *keramat* graves in Singapore. Sacred trees, like the Bodhi Tree at Bodh Gaya, may become important living pilgrimage sites, or woody focuses of worship and rituals. Most early studies on tree worship and sacred trees agree that the practice stems from animistic beliefs in the sentience and soul of all things and entities, including trees; everything is animate.<sup>30</sup> The Malay belief in the *semangat* of trees is undoubtedly one such example.

David L. Haberman, a researcher of sacred trees in India, posits that the belief in sacred trees also grew from the acceptance of the “personhood” of



Shirin Rafie

Illustration of Keramat Bukit Kasita at Bukit Purmei, 2018 © Faisal Husni

trees, where trees are viewed as people and “the sharp divide between human and nonhuman beings cannot be taken for granted. It also cannot be assumed as universal”.<sup>31</sup> This view of the world and nature accepts that trees are sentient beings. Not simple. Not lesser. Haberman highlights certain reasons why trees may be worshipped. They may embody a divinity or their form. They can serve as the dwelling of a divinity or a spirit, which would explain why trees are often considered homes of spirits in Malay beliefs. Trees, as explained earlier, may also be worshipped because they possess a force or soul.

Singapore too has its population of blessing-giving tree shrines. One of the most significant ambassadors of this botanical community is the sacred banyan tree (*ficus microcarpa* or Malayan banyan)<sup>32</sup> in the urban centre of Toa Payoh, Singapore, which is equipped with a “Chinese shrine” for rituals.<sup>33</sup> Sadly, like *keramat* graves, this tree too is constantly under threat of removal. Legend has it, when land development was underway in the 1960s, attempts at bulldozing this giant led to the vehicle being overturned. It was protected by a deity, that was what people believed. And thus, began its illustrious career as a tree shrine. The shrine attached to it also houses other gods such as Tua Pek Kong and Guanyin or the Goddess of Mercy, suggesting Taoist and Buddhist influences.<sup>34</sup> Such religious tree-related traditions within the Chinese community—be they Taoist or Buddhist—might have contributed to the approaches of the Chinese worshippers of *keramat* graves that are in close proximity to trees. It should also be noted, that, like the tree shrine in Toa Payoh, many of the trees present near or at *keramat* graves in the region, including a number in Singapore, happen to be banyan trees (often, *ficus benjamina*);<sup>35</sup> often dark towers made of arteries of thick, twisty bodies that reach and reach and reach. Incidentally, the common Malay name for banyan trees is *pohon beringin* (they are sometimes also called *pohon waringin*).<sup>36</sup> While I am still, working to discover its etymology, it is interesting to note that while the Malay word ‘*pohon*’, means ‘tree’, ‘*beringin*’ on the other hand means ‘to hope’ or ‘to want’. So, ‘*pohon beringin*’ could simply be translated to ‘tree of wantings’ or ‘tree of wishes’.

Unlike most sacred trees, like the Toa Payoh tree shrine, however, the trees around the *keramat* graves are not singled out for individual or independent worship. Albertina Nugteren writes that one of the ways the “wish granting properties” of wishing trees manifests is through “an anthropomorphised and personified tree deity to whom the tree provides merely an abode, a locus, and who has an existence independent of the tree”.<sup>37</sup> In at least one case in Singapore—Keramat Kusu Island—the *keramat* graves take on that role of the residing deity and extend their reach into the surrounding trees and space (much like a *genius loci*). Yet there is still a physical body or structure and main point of worship surrounded by the trees. This then allows the trees to serve also as living altars, where offerings dedicated to the *keramat* graves may also be offered upon them. The branches and trunks of the trees surrounding Keramat Kusu Island are dressed with a variety of offerings, from ribbons to bags of stones. By becoming altars for the worshippers, these trees extend the domain of the *keramat* graves beyond themselves and their shelters, down the body of the hill. The phenomenon of trees being altars or places for offerings dedicated to another object or focus of worship is not unique to *keramat* graves tradition. An example of a similar practice is that which surrounds the grave of Mae Nak in Thailand, where some trees residing near the shrine are wrapped and covered with scarves, and between their folds are letters from worshippers entreating her protection for soldiers, children, and the ill.<sup>38</sup>

Radin Mas Ayu was the daughter of a Javanese prince. She is believed to have died in 1511, after being stabbed while protecting her father. Today, an open yellow and green shelter houses her *keramat* grave. All around its sacred compounds are silent trees; silent and of such variety. However, the trees around this *keramat* grave and its shelter used to be much closer and tighter than they are now.



Faisal Husni

Offerings on trees around Keramat Kusu Island.  
These sets of offering had been tied on the branches  
of a fishtail palm, 2018 © Faisal Husni

38 antennae

.....  
*These elevations push these  
sacred sites and architecture  
to heights deserving of focuses  
of worship or reverence, above  
or overlooking the mundane  
ground level of the profane.*  
.....

If one could rewind time several decades, peel off the years of renovations undergone by the grave and its shelter, one would see a smaller structure, consumed by fingers and limbs of roots and bark; probably and unsurprisingly, banyan. They grew over the structure and gripped it so tightly that it is difficult to discern where tree ended and shelter began.<sup>39</sup> (Had the trees made it their responsibility to protect the grave, I wonder.) I believe, when trees surround a *keramat* grave, they add to the experience of sacredness of the space. For now, it is hard for us to be certain if some of these *keramat* graves were worshipped partially because they were surrounded by trees, or if the site was chosen for burial because it was already charged with a certain sacredness granted by these trees. What we can discern, however, is that a relationship has been fostered between the trees and the *keramat* graves; a relationship that manages to charge a space with *semangat* and sacredness, not from a single point but vibrating from all around.

### Height of Worship and Veneration

Fort Canning Hill, home of Keramat Iskandar Shah, which is believed by many to be the grave of the fourteenth-century ruler of Temasek.<sup>40</sup> To reach it, like many of the *keramat* graves in Singapore, one must be prepared to climb—a small sacrifice for wishes and miracles, don't you think? Them sitting on elevated land, I believe, is no accident. Keramat Radin Mas Ayu resides on the side of the large hill of Mount Faber. Keramat Kusu Island roosts on the peak of the hill of Kusu Island. Keramat Habib Nuh rests upon Mount Palmer hill. To the benefit of their very grateful visitors and worshippers, at each of these sites, there are now stairs available for either the entire ascent or part of it. This is not exclusive to *keramat* graves in Singapore. The *keramat* grave of Sunan Giri, one of the Wali Songo in Indonesia, for example, also sits upon a hill.<sup>41</sup>

As with the case of *keramat* graves' proximity to trees, that these locations were high or demanded worshippers and devotees to trudge up to them is not mere coincidence. The altitude of these locations are players in how their respective *keramat* graves are approached. Most obviously, it forces the worshippers to go through a journey that involves an ordeal, though not a painful one, at least not for the healthy. The worshippers would have to endure exhaustion from the climbing, often unprotected from the mean heat of Singapore, and sometimes, if you're like me, stress on the knees. This is similar to pilgrimages where devotees endure exhaustion and the weather to reach sacred sites. For example, in the wider Islamic tradition, many pilgrims of the Hajj are known to climb Mount Arafat, the hill where the Prophet Muhammad delivered his final sermon.

Several religious sites and architecture in Southeast Asia also ask of their worshippers and visitors to ascend or climb to a level that is elevated and may be viewed as closer to a higher plane, be it simply, the sky, or symbolically, the heavens. These elevations push these sacred sites and architecture to heights deserving of focuses of worship or reverence, above or overlooking the mundane ground level of the profane. The Buddhist Borobudur temple in Central Java, it has been argued—along with many other temple mountains of the region—was built upon the symbolism of Mount Meru.<sup>42</sup> The ascent up the mighty Borobudur can thus be seen as symbolic of an ascent up the sacred cosmic mountain.

Hills, while definitely not mountains, may share this grand symbolism of Mount Meru. John Miksic explains that "Hills... were frequently considered to have sacred qualities in Asia, as in much of the ancient world. The image of Mount Meru at the centre of the universe, a place where the gods were present and easily contacted..."<sup>43</sup> Humble hills such as Fort Canning and Mount Faber could have possessed such identities as sacred spaces and homes of the divine and supernatural. Munshi Abdullah, in his *Hikayat*, had related how unexplained sounds of drums and shouting could be heard from Fort Canning, once called Bukit Larangan or Forbidden Hill, supporting beliefs that the hill is home to ghosts and spirits.<sup>44</sup> Miksic wonders "if Fort Canning had been the ancient ceremonial centre of the isle, the



**Shirin Rafie**

Illustration of *Keramat Radin Mas Ayu*, based on a video recording of the keramat grave from the 1959 Cathay Keris film, *Raden Mas*, directed by L. Krishnan, 2020 © Faisal Husni

holy mountain of Temasik [Singapore]”.<sup>45</sup> The sacredness of these hills could have lifted and validated the sacredness and status of the *keramat* graves as sites of worship and veneration, in the eyes of the worshippers and devotees.

**Water and a Shoreline of Shrines**

Singapore has gone through numerous phases of land reclamation processes and still continues to do so; swelling in size unnaturally.<sup>46</sup> Its shape has inevitably changed. I decided to plot the locations of the different *keramat* graves in this study and some that have disappeared, upon a map of Singapore. The more graves I add-

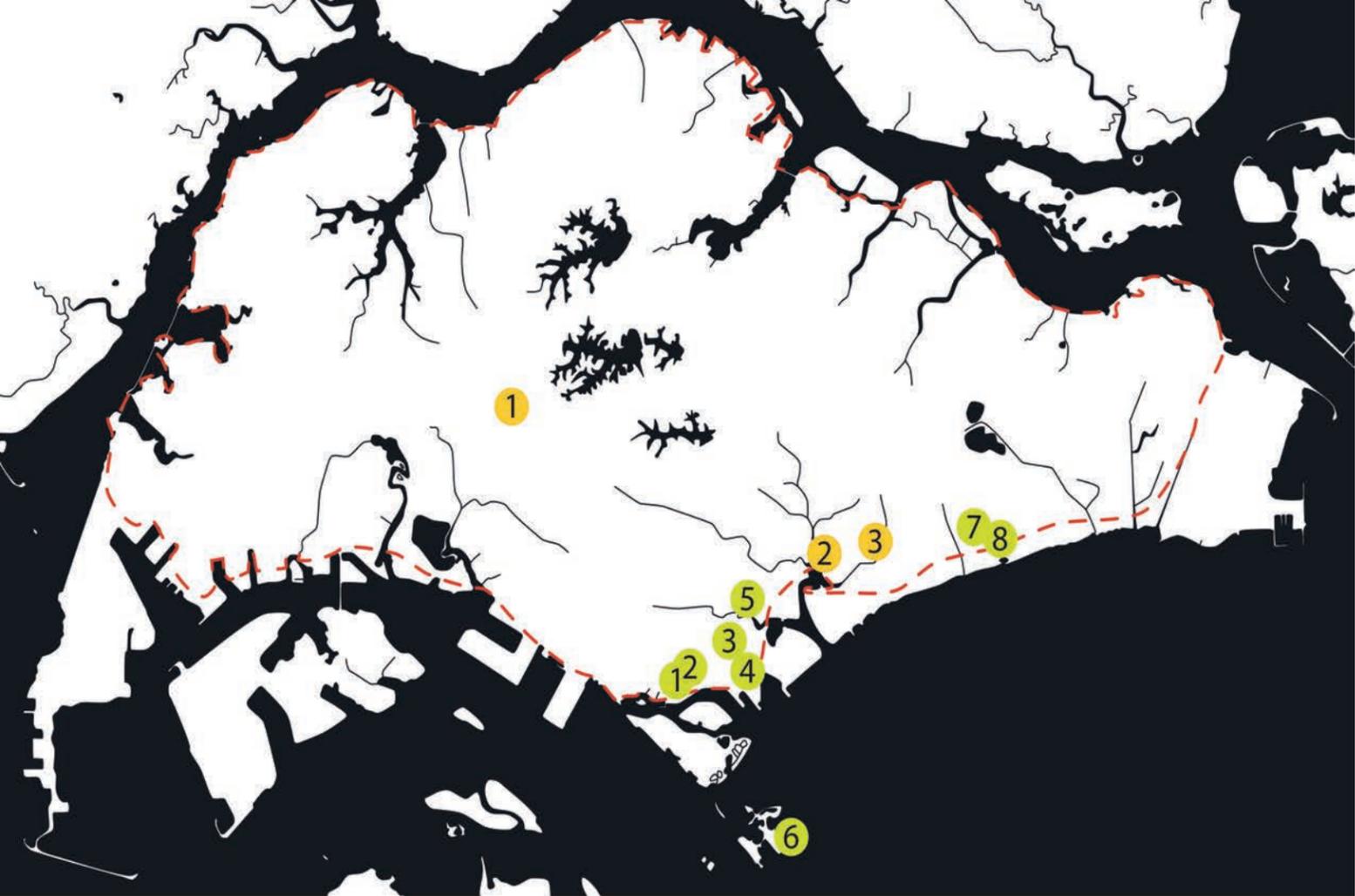


**Faisal Husni**

*Keramat Iskandar Shah at Fort Canning*, 2018 © Faisal Husni

ed, the more a visual pattern surfaced. Many of the *keramat* graves dot the southern parts of Singapore, like stops on one long trail or future train line. I suspect if we were able to turn back the flow of time on all the land reclamation initiatives of this country, we would see that the majority of these graves were close to Singapore’s earlier southern shoreline. Keramat Habib Nuh, for example, was said to be right by the sea, with the waves lapping against the side of Mount Palmer where it sits.<sup>47</sup> This seems to have been memorialised in a postcard from the early twentieth century, currently, in the collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board, where the *keramat* grave has been illustrated in black and white, with the sea—its surface punctuated by my ships and boats—just beyond it. (Imagine the constant voices of the ocean it once listened to.) The proximity of the locations of many of the *keramat* graves in Singapore to the sea or water reflects the significance of the waters or the ocean to *keramat* grave worship and veneration.

Singapore’s maritime history may be a contributor to this pattern. Sumit Mandal points out that for *keramat* graves of the region, while the ethnic background of the individuals whose graves are considered *keramat* vary, they were often individuals with Hadrami heritage or ancestry.<sup>48</sup> Habib Nuh was one such figure. Mandal states that, “Given their prominence along the cosmopolitan trading routes of the Indian Ocean as well as their claims to descent from the Prophet, Hadramis or those of Part-Hadrami descent were the paradigmatic *keramat*”.<sup>49</sup> The connection between the Hadrami heritage of some of the individuals interred at the Singapore *keramat* graves, and the significance of the Hadramis to maritime history, could account for why many of these individuals were buried near the shoreline. Another thing to consider is that immigrants to the region, espe-



Existing Keramat Graves:

- 1 Keramat Radin Mas Ayu
- 2 Keramat Bukit Kasita
- 3 Keramat Sharifah Rogayah
- 4 Keramat Habib Nuh
- 5 Keramat Iskandar Shah
- 6 Keramat Kusu Island
- 7 Keramat Sheik Ali
- 8 Keramat Tok Lasam

Demolished/Disappeared Keramat Graves:

- 1 Keramat Habib Syed Ismail
- 2 Keramat Siti Mariam
- 3 Keramat Panjang & Keramat Katijah

--- Singapore Shoreline Before Land Reclamation

cially during the 19th century, settled along the coast. These also included Hadrami settlers.<sup>50</sup> Where they built their homes could also be where they buried their dead. Also, many *keramat* graves of the region reside in areas with a history of “sea traffic and trading”.<sup>51</sup> Keppel Harbour or New Harbour, which was used as a passage for maritime activity even before the 19th century, lies on the southern point of Singapore.<sup>52</sup> This could explain why the Singapore *keramat* graves are found mostly on the southern shoreline of Singapore and not the northern shoreline facing Malaysia.

These *keramat* graves may also prefer the coastline because naturally occurring water bodies—such as oceans, seas, rivers, and streams—are also viewed in many cultures and religions as connected to the sacred, spiritual and supernatural. Earlier Malay cultures believed that water bodies are homes to water spirits, and sometimes rocks protruding from rivers or streams may be decorated with a white cloth on sticks or poles to mark the space as a “sacred place.” Some of these spirits, specifically sea spirits, maybe entreated to assist ships from meeting disasters.<sup>53</sup> Given Singapore’s seafaring and maritime history, this belief may be significant.

Furthermore, the sea has been a prominent player in some of the religious practices among the Muslim community in Singapore. While the practice began dying out sometime in the early 1960s, the tradition of *mandi safar* used to be popular among a segment of Singapore’s Muslim community. It involves the act of bathing to be rid of ill luck or misfortune. Many chose to perform this in the sea and often communally. The ritual was done on the third Wednesday of the month of *Safar* in the Islamic calendar. Some hold the opinion that this practice could have been influenced by similar Hindu practices of bathing in the river Ganges.<sup>54</sup> This example of a sea-focused Islamic worship and its possible Hindu influence raises two important points. Firstly, the ocean is believed to be a force with the ability to bless worshippers, not unlike *keramat* graves.

Secondly, several cultures and religions share beliefs in the sacredness of water, oceans, and seas, even within the Malay world and Southeast Asia, and some of these cultures and religions belong to the communities of response that approach *keramat* graves. They may then bring with them forms of sea or ocean worship and veneration, from their own culture and religion. The Javanese worship and veneration of Nyai Roro Kidul, the goddess queen of the Southern Ocean, for example, is very tied to the seas.<sup>55</sup> Vestiges of such Javanese sea worship may have found a home in the worship of *keramat* graves close to the sea, as many from the Malay community in Singapore have Javanese ancestry. Another example is the worship of the Chinese sea goddess Mazu, who has devotees and temples even in Singapore.<sup>56</sup> This shared belief in the sacredness of the sea could have allowed *keramat* graves that were near the ocean to be approached more easily by different communities. It may have made the sites, by extension, sacred. This in turn validates the status of these graves as venerated objects.

Apart from being viewed as sacred, the sea performed roles in the lives and hagiographies of some of the *keramat* grave *awliya*. Habib Nuh was said to have been born on a ship out at sea and during a storm, which immediately subsided upon his birth.<sup>57</sup> A version of the story of Syed Abdul Rahman, tells of how, by his *karamah*, a sampan carrying him and his companion could travel between Kusu Island and mainland Singapore without them needing to row, as if carried by the sea.<sup>58</sup> Siti Maryam, whose *keramat* grave in Kallang had been exhumed in 2010, was said to possess “sea knowledge” and was a “facilitator of healthy climate” and “protector of various groups such as fishermen, sailors, travellers and coastal communities in Singapore”.<sup>59</sup> And as if speaking from somewhere beyond life, through water, the custodian of her grave before its exhumation, Wak Ali Janggut, had heard her voice while on a diving expedition.<sup>60</sup>

All this suggests that these miracles and blessings of these *awliya* are strongly connected to the ocean. Yet this tradition is not unique when we survey the broader Malay and Islamic world. Khidr, for example, is a holy figure in the Is-

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Left: The locations of the *keramat* graves in Singapore. Note that there are a few still to be determined to either still be around or have been demolished. This is an ongoing endeavour.

lamic tradition—sometimes viewed as a prophet, sometimes, a *wali*—said to possess great wisdom and believed to be an immortal.<sup>61</sup> Some of his shrines may be found in parts of Turkey, Sri Lanka and Pakistan.<sup>62</sup> He is considered a “patron-saint of sailors that his name is invoked down to this day by the sailors every time a boat is being launched in parts of the Middle East and Northern India”.<sup>63</sup> This suggests that beliefs in Singapore *awliya* with sea-themed powers may indeed have roots in, or influences from, older and wider Islamic traditions.

Another figure that *awliya*, like Siti Maryam, and their graves share similar sea-themed powers with is the *pawang*. A *pawang* is “a male or female miracle-worker who [possesses] *ilmu* (esoteric science) and the *berkat* (power-grace) of God and eclectic spiritual beings such as Muhammad and Siva”<sup>64</sup> and is found in the traditions of the Malay world. They may be approached by communities or individuals for supernatural aid or miracles. Individuals considered *pawang*s are often divided into categories according to their expertise. For example, *pawang gajah*, or the elephant *pawang*, has the ability to hunt, subdue and domesticate elephants. The *pawang laut*, or sea *pawang*, may be further subdivided into more specific specialisations. *Pawang ikan* or fish *pawang* “has the mystical knowledge to sight fish and bring good catch”. *Pawang kapal*, or ship *pawang* “is believed to be endowed with the magical power to steer boats to safety in rough seas”.<sup>65</sup>

Hagiographies of the *wali* figure, Shahul Hamid Nagori, whose shrines or *dargah* may be found in parts of India and Southeast Asia (including Singapore), included many water or sea themed miracles from bringing rain to curing illnesses with water; a connection to water that is similar to many *awliya* found or interred in Singapore. The *dargah* devoted to Shahul Hamid are known to have large tanks. The waters from these tanks are for the public and are associated with the miraculous abilities of the *wali*. Upon the anniversary of Shahul Hamid’s death, the head of the *dargah* also conducts a ritual, which is performed by the ocean, at the spot where Shahul Hamid himself was believed to have performed a forty-day meditation.<sup>66</sup> The significance of water and the ocean to the life of Shahul Hamid has somehow ensured that water and the ocean are part of the life and rituals of his shrines. *Keramat* graves are no different.

The only way to get to Kusu Island from mainland Singapore is by ferry from the Marina South Pier. So, even today, worshippers of Keramat Kusu Island journey over water, mirroring the one Syed Abdul Rahman was believed to have made on a sampan, once upon a time, to the sacred island where his grave now welcomes devotees and pilgrims. The sea, at least in the examples provided earlier, may be seen as integral to the worship of these *keramat* graves. And while I cannot assume that these individuals—namely, Habib Nuh, Siti Maryam, and Syed Abdul Rahman—were buried near the sea because of their connection to it, this proximity does emphasize this relationship; a relationship that is built on miracles, and one that is inherited by their graves.

#### The Grave that Chose the Hill

Habib Nuh died on 27 July 1866. Though his community had intended to have him buried at a Muslim cemetery, attempts at moving his casket proved impossible. Many tried and heaved and failed. It had grown too heavy, stuck to the ground. Then, someone amongst the grieving crowd announced that he recalled the late *wali* mentioning his wishes to be interred upon Mount Palmer. It was decided then, agreed the group; the hill with the sea at its foot. That same individual then held the front of the casket while another took the other end. They planted their feet firmly and their backs were ready for weight. Together they lifted it and found it was no longer too heavy, no longer dragged by gravity, no longer burdened. The body of Habib Nuh was buried upon the hill of Mount Palmer.<sup>67</sup> This story expresses the agency of the *wali* and his corpse, over his final resting place. However, it also underscores that the location of the *keramat* grave was not random, and possi-

.....  
*They planted their feet firmly and their backs were ready for weight. Together they lifted it and found it was no longer too heavy, no longer dragged by gravity, no longer burdened.*  
 .....



The ‘Keramat Habib Noh’ at Palmer Road, postcard, early 20th century, 8.5 x 13.6 cm, Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board. Courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

bly chosen, whether by the *wali* or by a community. The significance of this choice, I believe, was due to the combination of its importance to Habib Nuh as a space for his own religious activities and the sacredness of hills, the ocean, and—as the vegetation illustrated around the *keramat* grave, in the earlier mentioned postcard, seems to suggest—trees.<sup>68</sup>

When we look at the similarities between the different *keramat* grave locations in Singapore, as well as the shared beliefs of the different communities of response, it isn’t hard to see why they remain relevant to *keramat* grave worship. It is evident that many of the sites and spaces occupied by these graves have natural occurring features that lend themselves to be viewed as sacred spaces, be it the presence of trees, heights or even proximity to water. Chambert-Loir claims, “the power of the place is still revered but somehow legitimised by the veneration of a Muslim grave [*keramat* grave]”.<sup>69</sup> At this stage of this research it is difficult to be sure, without earlier records or documentation of these sites, if these spaces in Singapore were regarded sacred before the arrival of their respective *keramat* graves, or whether these sites would have received worshippers without these graves. However, Chambert-Loir’s claim is still sound and of relevance to this study. These features of the land have served the *keramat* graves in creating locations that are so charged with sacredness, tapping into the different yet somehow universal beliefs in the sacredness of trees, hills, and water. And by being in an environment that is viewed as sacred, the *keramat* graves’ status as sites and objects of worship is validated and endorsed.

In return, the *keramat* graves include the environment around them as players in the phenomenon of their worship and veneration, having devotees be surrounded by trees, climb heights and be near the sea, making the location integral in the practice. This continues the veneration and worship of trees, hills, and water, in forms that are somehow preserved through the *keramat* grave tradition. Thus, in the study of *keramat* graves—or any religious site or space, for that matter—the locations, surroundings and environment they inhabit need to be considered, not just the structure itself in isolation.

Because the Malay word, *keramat* can also refer to a sacred place, not just the grave.

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### Endnotes

- [1] Rivers interestingly states that Sharifah Fatimah was Syed Abdul Rahman's Daughter, instead of Sister, while most other sources state that she was his sister. P. J. Rivers "Keramat In Singapore In The Mid-Twentieth Century," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 76, no. 02 (2003)," 107.
- [2] This is difficult to determine. Rivers included a question mark after 1816. Rivers, "Keramat In Singapore In The Mid-Twentieth Century," 107.
- [3] The Malay word, *keramat*, means a place or object that is sacred and (believed to be) able to bring magical blessings. The word is also used in the Malay world to refer to living Islamic miracle workers, not just their graves. It is derived from the Arabic word *karamah* (كَمْرَاه) which is defined as dignity or worth, and also a miracle performed by a *wali*. Hagiographies of *awliya* such as Habib Nuh bin Muhammad Al Habshi (sometimes spelled Habib Noh), whose grave is the Keramat Habib Nuh are replete with extraordinary stories of such *karamah*. The Malay language loan-word, *keramat*, is used to label shrines, venerated animals, trees, objects such as rocks, miracle workers, and graves of significant persons or *awliya*. Within this process, a shift of meaning happens, from the noun *karamah* (to signify the miraculous abilities) to the noun *keramat* (to also signify the vessel with the abilities). It can thus be argued that *keramat* grave worship and veneration occur through the filtering of Islamic grave worship through Malay language and culture. *Kamus Dewan Edisi Keempat* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 2013), 751; Teren Sevea, "Writing a History of a Saint, Writing an Islamic History of a Port City," *Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre Working Paper*, No. 27 (Apr 2018), 2; Russell Jones, *Loan-words in Indonesia and Malay* (Jakarta: KITLV Press, 2008), 150; Mohamad Ghouse Khan Surattee, *The Grand Saint of Singapore: The Life of Habib Nuh Bin Muhammad Al-Habshi* (Singapore: Masjid Al'Firdaus, 2008), 37-45; R.J. Wilkinson, *A Malay- English Dictionary* (Singapore: Kelly & Walsh, Limited, 1901), 509.
- [4] I acknowledge that definitions and boundaries of the Malay World continue to be debated. For the purposes of this study, I use the term to encompass Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia, Southern Thailand, and Singapore. However, evidence of *keramat* grave worship can be found mainly in Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei, and Indonesia.
- [5] A group of nine famous *awliya* (Islamic saint-like figures) who are revered in Indonesia.
- [6] *Oxford Arabic Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 703.
- [7] It would be irresponsible of me not to mention that *keramat* grave worship is considered forbidden by many in the Singapore Muslim community, including religious leaders. This is a perspective shared by many Muslims within the region, namely Malaysia and Brunei, as it may be regarded as idolatry and sinful (*syirik*), to worship something or someone other than Allah. Dominik M. Müller explores the differences (and the affects and conflicts of these differences) between the interpretation of Islam by Islamic bureaucracies, Muslim majorities, and smaller personal interpretation of Islam within the region's Muslim communities. These personal interpretations of Islam that are "refusing to comply with the bureaucracy's interpretation of Islamic doctrine" are still relevant and no less Islamic as they are rooted in an Islamic belief in the power of the *wali*. There are also numerous traditions of Islamic grave worship around the world, some of which are viewed by their communities and worshippers as unquestionably Islamic and integral to how they approach and practice their faith. Examples of these include festivals called *nerccas* held at tombs of Sufi saints of Kerala, Uyghur Islamic grave shrines in Xinjiang, China, and the grave shrines of Baba Farid in Pakpattan, Punjab. Their very existence supports the perspective of the plurality of Islam, and that Islam is not a monolithic religion with a single approach or interpretation; an argument that is not foreign to the field of Islamic art. Zuraihan bte Isahak, *Cultural Practice versus Religious Injunctions: A Study of Keramat Worship in Singapore* (Singapore: Dept. of Malay Studies, National University of Singapore, 1995); *Bongkar Season 2*, presented by Screenbox (2008: Singapore: Screenbox 2008), DVD; Dominik M. Müller, "The Bureaucratization of Islam and its Socio-Legal Dimensions in Southeast Asia: conceptual contours of a research project," *Working Paper No. 187*, (Halle / Saale: Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, 2017); Stephen F. Dale and M. Gangadhara Menon, "Nerccas: Saint-Martyr Worship Among The Muslims of Kerala," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, University of London 41, no. 3 (1978): 523-538; Rian Thum, *The Sacred Routes of Uyghur History* (USA: Harvard University Press, 2014); Richard M. Eaton, "Court of Man, Court of God: Local Perceptions of the Shrine of Baba Farid, Pakpattan, Punjab," *Essays on Islam and Indian History* (India: Oxford University Press, 2002): 227-246; Avinoam Shalem, "What do we mean when we say 'Islamic art'? A plea for critical rewriting of the history of the arts of Islam". *Journal of Art Historiography*, Vol. 6 (2012).
- [8] Sultan Iskandar Shah and Radin Mas Ayu are such examples. Rivers, "Keramat In Singapore In The Mid-Twentieth Century"
- [9] Tok Lasam, for example, was one of the founders of Siglap in Singapore, known for his acts of heroism. Rivers, "Keramat In Singapore In The Mid-Twentieth Century," 113.
- [10] This category includes Radin Mas Ayu who died being stabbed by a *keris* while protecting her father, and Syed Yasin whose death has been gilded with a theme of both religious and anti-colonial martyrdom. Syed Yasin's grave became

- a site of worship because he "killed a Fakir (the Hindoo) and wounded a Nazarene (Colonel Farquhar)" before being brutally killed himself. His *keramat* grave seems to have been lost. Ibrahim Tahir, *A Village Remembered: Kampong Radin Mas 1800s - 1973* (Singapore: OPUS Editorial Private Limited, 2013), 49-52; Charles B. Buckley, *An Anecdotal History of Singapore, Volume I* (Singapore: Fraser and Neave, Limited, 1902), 100.
- [11] Tok Lasam's corpse became the colour of saffron. This was viewed as a miracle. Rivers, "Keramat In Singapore In The Mid-Twentieth Century," 76.
- [12] Henri Chambert-Loir, "Saints and Ancestors: the cult of Muslim saints in Java," *The Potent Dead: Ancestors, Saints, and Heroes in Contemporary Indonesia*, (Indonesia, Allen & Unwin, 2002)," 136.
- [13] Chambert-Loir, "Saints and Ancestors," 136.
- [14] Zuraihan bte Isahak, *Cultural Practice versus Religious Injunctions*.
- [15] Apart from Singaporean worshippers, Keramat Habib Nuh also receives devotees from other countries such as Indonesia, while Keramat Kusu Island, those from Myanmar, Thailand, and China.
- [16] A Keramat Kusu Island a devotee who identify with Islamic approaches of worship may choose to read Islamic prayers, while a worshipper identifying with Buddhist approaches of worship may find and use joss sticks at the site.
- [17] For example, Keramat Kusu Island seems to be worshipped by mainly the Chinese during the annual pilgrimage period to the island during the ninth month of the Chinese lunar calendar, and its worship happens in conjunction with worship at a Chinese temple on the island.
- [18] Richard Davis, *Lives of Indian Images* (USA: Princeton University Press, 1997).
- [19] Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process" in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Ed. Appadurai, Arjun. (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 64-91.
- [20] Ahmad Mohd Don, "Makam Siti Subaida Yg Penuh Misteri" *Berita Minggu*, March 31, 1985, 3.
- [21] There are stories about how the construction of the East Coast Parkway Expressway (which would have involved the demolition of the *keramat* grave of Habib Nuh) was wrought with misfortunes and mechanical malfunctions. Only upon the plans of the expressway being altered and prayers at the *keramat* grave were made was the project able to continue. Surattee, *The Grand Saint of Singapore*. 51-52.
- [22] Davis, *Lives of Indian Images*. 9.
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- [25] Richard Winstedt and Seong Chee Tham, *The Malays: A Cultural History* (Singapore: G. Brash, 1981), 19.
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- [68] Habib Nuh was known to perform Islamic invocations or *dzikr* by himself "atop Mount Plamer, which at that time was surrounded by a thick jungle and faced the sea..." Surattee, *The Grand Saint of Singapore*, 34.
- [69] Chambert-Loir, "Saints and Ancestors," 136.

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# The local is an alternate reality

*Creatures of Near Kingdoms (Maple Comics) is a speculative visual narrative – prose by Zedeck Siew, lino prints and pattern designs by Sharon Chin – that draws from real experiences in Port Dickson, Malaysia. In cataloging various flora and fauna in and around Malaysia, this bestiary tackles issues of biodiversity, climate change, and the eternal question of being haunted by our future past. We set this alongside the transcript of a conversation between Siew and Chin at the Ilham Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in September 2018.*

text by **Zedeck Siew, Sharon Chin, and Lee Weng Choy**

**C***reatures of Near Kingdoms* is an illustrated bestiary of 75 animals and plants native to Southeast Asia. The debut novel of writer Zedeck Siew, created in collaboration by visual artist Sharon Chin, it is the latest title in the Maple Comics stable.

Conceived by Siew, each creature is described in short, single-page prose pieces, reminiscent of naturalist's entries or notes in kitabs of animal lore. Illustrated by Chin, the book's animals are depicted in linocut-print illustrations; while its plants are rendered in fabric pattern designs.

The book aims to present a world, natural and supernatural, parallel to our own where trees with the souls of birds long to take flight; moral-police mites live in our eyelids, and give us styes; worms in your phone post ill-advised social-media updates on your behalf. *Creatures of Near Kingdoms* is informed by local folklore, scientific fact about indigenous species, and imaginative fancy inspired by life in Malaysia. Its art draws from Southeast Asian forms: traditional (batik, wayang, printmaking) and modern (national logos, sundry packaging) alike.

[Zedeck and Sharon introduce themselves by means of a video on Port Dickson, Malaysia.]

**Zedeck Siew:** I'm writing a book. It's a collection of 75 pieces of microfiction. They are all descriptions of imaginary animals and plants, indigenous to SE Asia. I'm writing them in both English and Malay. They'll be illustrated by Sharon.

**Sharon Chin:** I'm making the pictures for the book. Each story will be illustrated, so that's 50 animals and 25 plants. [...] I am brainstorming ideas, and will eventually develop these into drawings. [...] [Sharon explains linocut process.]

[Video ends]

**ZS:** We'd like to show you some images of our hometown. [...] [Photo of abandoned building in Port Dickson onscreen.] Note how the edge of the building [runs] into the sea. Port Dickson has a wasteland aesthetic.

**SC:** You should see inside the hotel - it's amazing. There's lots of graffiti.

**ZS:** Here's our cat. She's the only example of wildlife that we have photographed so well. [...] She runs away whenever people come to visit.

**SC:** You say that living with her is like living with a wild animal.

[Video of person at a morning assembly at a school in Port Dickson, talking in Malay.]

**ZS:** The tone of the person making the speeches is always scoldy and shouty. [On another video clip] This is the refinery next to the school. Sharon thinks it looks like Mordor. [Ed. - from Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* films.]

**SC:** The constant sound bothers me.

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**ZS:** Our friend Leena works for the marine station there. She identified this sea slug in the Port Dickson waters.

**SC:** [...] She wanted to name it after a Malaysian hero, [trans-activist] Nisha Ayub. [...] It looks like seaweed. [...] [We've spent time talking] with Leena [...] It's very good and difficult to talk to scientists today because they don't gloss things over. We talk about climate change.

**ZS:** She was very fatalistic. She said that there's nothing we can do - it's too late.

**SC:** But in a funny way, it did not seem hopeless.

**ZS:** That's Port Dickson, our home, which is an hour and a half away from Kuala Lumpur. I grew up there [in Port Dickson]. And the house you saw is the house I grew up in.

**SC:** We wanted to start off with these images of Port Dickson, because it's important [to us].

**Weng Choy:** Maybe we can talk about the process of the book. You talk about how place is important, but when did the decision to do the book start forming?

**ZS:** When we moved to Port Dickson, that was 7 years ago. I had just been laid off and wanted to work on a book, but I didn't know what on. [...] I was frustrated and started writing about things around me. Living in Port Dickson, you're surrounded by [lots of animals]... Frogs are constantly hopping around our house.

**SC:** The frogs live in the house. At first, there was one; eventually, there were many.

**ZS:** There are also bats nesting in the eaves; monkeys; and monitor lizards scratching on our front window. I started writing about that, and those became the pieces of text in the book.

**WC:** Are all the creatures in the book fantastical?

**ZS:** Yes. The trendy word is "irreal". I've heard it used when people don't want to use the word "fantasy" or "science fiction."

**WC:** But it seems that process is also grounded in observation.

**ZS:** I have this theory, that the supernatural in this part of the world is a kind of realist

fiction. It's related to that grounded sense of the fantastic. Genre fiction in the West is always uncanny, or surreal; I don't think that sense is present for us.

**WC:** Is there a similarity with magical realism?

**ZS:** I'm not sure. Magic here is not a departure.

**SC:** Maybe approaching it through art could help. I was thinking of flatness. Take batik design, e.g. Latiff Mohidin's work. [His work was then on view at Ilham Gallery.] Everything is inhabiting the same picture plane. There's no illusion of depth. I've seen batik - *batik dongeng* - where Little Red Riding Hood is depicted on one sheet of batik. You don't read it from beginning to end; you look at the story all at once. Maybe this is a way to talk about what you're saying, Zedeck. Magic and reality inhabit this same plane or field, just as humans and nonhuman animals inhabit the same environment.

**ZS:** Sharon was contacted recently by a friend who has a homestay space. Sharon sent her an image, a lino print, and the friend said, "Got snake. Cannot!" Our friend very self-consciously said, "You can laugh about it, but still we can't have it." [...] I read an article, recently, quoting an East Malaysian, which goes: "We are back for the harvest festival, but we can't sleep in the longhouse, because that's where the ancestor spirits are. If we sleep there, they will be angry at us, because we don't believe in them anymore, because we're Christian now." That encapsulates what I feel, and have come to observe - the way this culture relates to the supernatural.

**SC:** We get asked a lot: "Are the animals in the book real?" Another comment we often get is: "I thought I knew this already." But it's more like forms of knowledge that you only know that you knew once you've read it. Some folk songs operate that way. I've known this all my life - but only when I heard it.

**WC:** This sounds familiar. Somehow the form of the story is part of it. The form is more familiar, more than the content. Also, it's the kind of world you're talking about. All these connections are there. So that you feel the edge of a connection, then you make [the image] even though you don't have something in your past that connects with it.

**ZS:** Regarding the form, that's possible. The book recalls naturalist guides and similar publications.

**WC:** I'm also thinking about the writing, the rhythm of language. It's almost like this [text] could be of a parent speaking to a child. It's not like you're a scientist writing a report.

**SC:** You also folded in a lot of folk tales. Skeat's *Malay Magic* was a reference for you.<sup>1</sup>

**ZS:** One or two animals are things recorded in Skeat's book. [...]

**SC:** Do you feel okay about retelling these tales? There's something absolute about these tales - and yet people appropriate them. Is there a way of telling these tales in a non-appropriative, non-colonial way?

**ZS:** When I was writing these stories, I asked Sharon "Do I have to attribute these to Skeat?" How I made my peace with it is: he doesn't attribute the people he's taking these stories from. But also I'm okay with it now because these are stories that are present in our culture, though we don't quite see them. For example, the dog story in the book makes reference to the story of the huntsman ghost, *hantu pemburu*. We picked up a book three days ago from a bargain bin - which made reference to that huntsman ghost story.

**SC:** It's thorny. It's about how one relates to these tales... I ask myself: are we in the same

flow as these tales? For example, a couple of months ago I had a waking dream of a *dato kong* [ed. - guardian spirit] for LGBTQ people. Dato kong would appear in a place, and people would build a shrine to it. This waking dream was a form of a *dato kong*; or it was trying to find a form available to it. So it's not about making a story about a *dato kong*; I felt that we were more the channels for the form. The thing wants to come into being, and that's why the images occur. Either you rise to the occasion, or you don't.

**WC:** There's a certain security about living in the flow. There isn't an anxiousness, [to ask if] is this my place, etc. [This is linked to the fact that] you don't have an introduction to the book; rather than frame and bracket and explain, you just jump in. The world is just given in that way.

**SC:** What's crucial here is the question of time. This relationship takes a long time to inhabit. For example, I would feel that these are not things you mess around with. Would I make a shrine to this image that I [have seen]? That's on me to do. It's not a choice. But it is related to flow, about what wants to come into being.

**WC:** You talk about that kind of trust and relationship to a world. This was a collaboration. If we could talk about this process, of putting down words and visualizing the story. How did it work?

**ZS:** When I started writing the stories, I wrote all of them, and I gave them to Sharon. I didn't have the conscious thought "I want these illustrated".

**SC:** The form of the book was important to you. Before you wrote this book, you wrote another book... of a hundred stories. It was as though you had to write those hundred stories before these particular stories. I remember you posted them [ed. - the earlier ones] on Facebook.

**ZS:** And you started making the images. [Goes through some photos of the prints.] This is [an exhibition of the lino prints in] a space in Penang – Run Amok. This was in 2016. [Run Amok was an artist-run space and collective comprising Hoo Fan Chon, Trevor Hampson, Tetriana Ahmad Fauzi, Hasanul Isyraf Idris, Minstrel Kuik, and Liew Kwai Fei. It shut in 2017, after Hampson's passing.]

**SC:** I had to do it in stages. ... We sold some prints to give us some money.

**ZS:** There would be many copies, and they would be affordable. Also, they were available in series, to appeal to collectors.

**SC:** We make art, but we want to circulate value, as opposed to accumulate [money or objects]. The idea comes from Douglas Rushkoff [specifically, from his book *Throwing Rocks at the Google Bus*], of reprogramming the economy. It's such that we're more biased to the circulation of value.

**ZS:** It was this show that solidified for me that the book can't be a hardcover. And Sharon thought it was important to have a space where people could sit down and do stuff.

**WC:** Sharon, do you feel that your illustrations changed the book? Did Zedeck start rewriting it [based on your illustrations]?

**SC:** No. There were many things that I was thinking about, chief among them was money. How are we going to make this book happen? Regarding form - why these linocuts? These questions came first. One thing with the linocuts: actually, I've never learned how to draw. I approach art from a conceptual point of view. But moving to

Port Dickson I had to unlearn that in some ways. People would ask me to draw things, and I thought I had better learn. This whole project was drawing intensive.

**ZS:** For the past two days, Sharon has been drawing a logo for her local gym.

**SC:** It's about the social function of art and artists. In Port Dickson, it's about what they [ie. the community] need from me. How do I give what is needed and wanted?

[Conversation is now open to the floor]

**Ray Langenbach:** I love your way of interweaving different ecologies. You were talking about global warming and working with scientists. And then you talk about these other value systems – these economies are an ecology as well. I was fascinated by ghosts and spirits, and that ecology. I saw a trashy zombie movie recently, *Rampant*<sup>2</sup>... the notion of the dead as piles of spirits from the past. So the possibility of global warming brings the dead to the future. It's us. How do you deal with this underlying infrasound of global warming, the great extinction? And how does that then affect your work at the level of the local? Could you speak to this hauntology of the future?

**ZS:** Even after the apocalypse, people will write stories. It's the inevitability of the end, but the question is what do we do between now and the end itself, and after.

**SC:** Of course, there are people who've already experienced the apocalypse – Black people, or people in Latin America. And they live and continue to thrive today. I'm going to follow that future.

**ZS:** When we talked to Leena, she reminded us of this question: What are you going to do now?

A video recording of the full conversation can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZFvGCIWytQM&feature=youtu.be>

### **Endnotes**

[1] Walter William Skeat, *Malay Magic: Being an Introduction to the Folklore and Popular Religion of the Malay Peninsula* (London: Macmillan and co., 1900).

[2] Directed by Kim Sung-Hoon, 2018.

**Zedeck Siew** is a writer based in Malaysia. He has worked as a journalist, editor, and critic for publications like art journal *Kakiseni*, news website *The Nut Graph*, lifestyle magazine *KLue*, and community-level information portal *Poskod.my*. Siew has dabbled in performance, most notably in Five Arts Centre's experimental shadow-theatre project *Wayang Fajar* (2009), and has appeared in films like Amir Muhammad's *The Big Durian* (2003) and Azharr Rudin's *Via* (2012). In 2011, Zedeck left gainful employment in media to write fiction and starve full-time. He lives in Port Dickson with trees and visual artist Sharon Chin.

**Sharon Chin** is an artist living in Port Dickson, Malaysia. She has made paintings, performances, costumes, sculptures, installations and videos, and worked across a variety of fields, including fine art, criticism, illustration, film, and journalism. She has shown in museums and galleries, on sidewalks and in shopping malls, in Malaysia and around the world. Her work is in the permanent collections of Singapore Art Museum and Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art (QAGOMA).



## *Tectonic Mudskipper*

Look at the shape of East Malaysia. To you it looks like an animal. It has a long body laid out; an upcurled tail, a large-ish head; eyes protruding up top; an open mouth, about to speak.

It is a Tectonic Mudskipper. It belongs to a class of creatures known as geographic megafauna. These are found across the globe. The Namazu Eels of Japan belong to this group, and so too the Leviathan Fish of the Mediterranean—

And also Bahamut, great whale swimming through the void, upon whose back all creation is borne, where all of us live: symbionts or parasites, great or small, each of us insignificant.

Tectonic Mudskippers are modestly vast. They comprise all the landmasses of Southeast Asia: from the folds of the Ayeyarwaddy to the Solomon Sea. The largest single specimen snoozes on its side, under the states of Sabah and Sarawak.

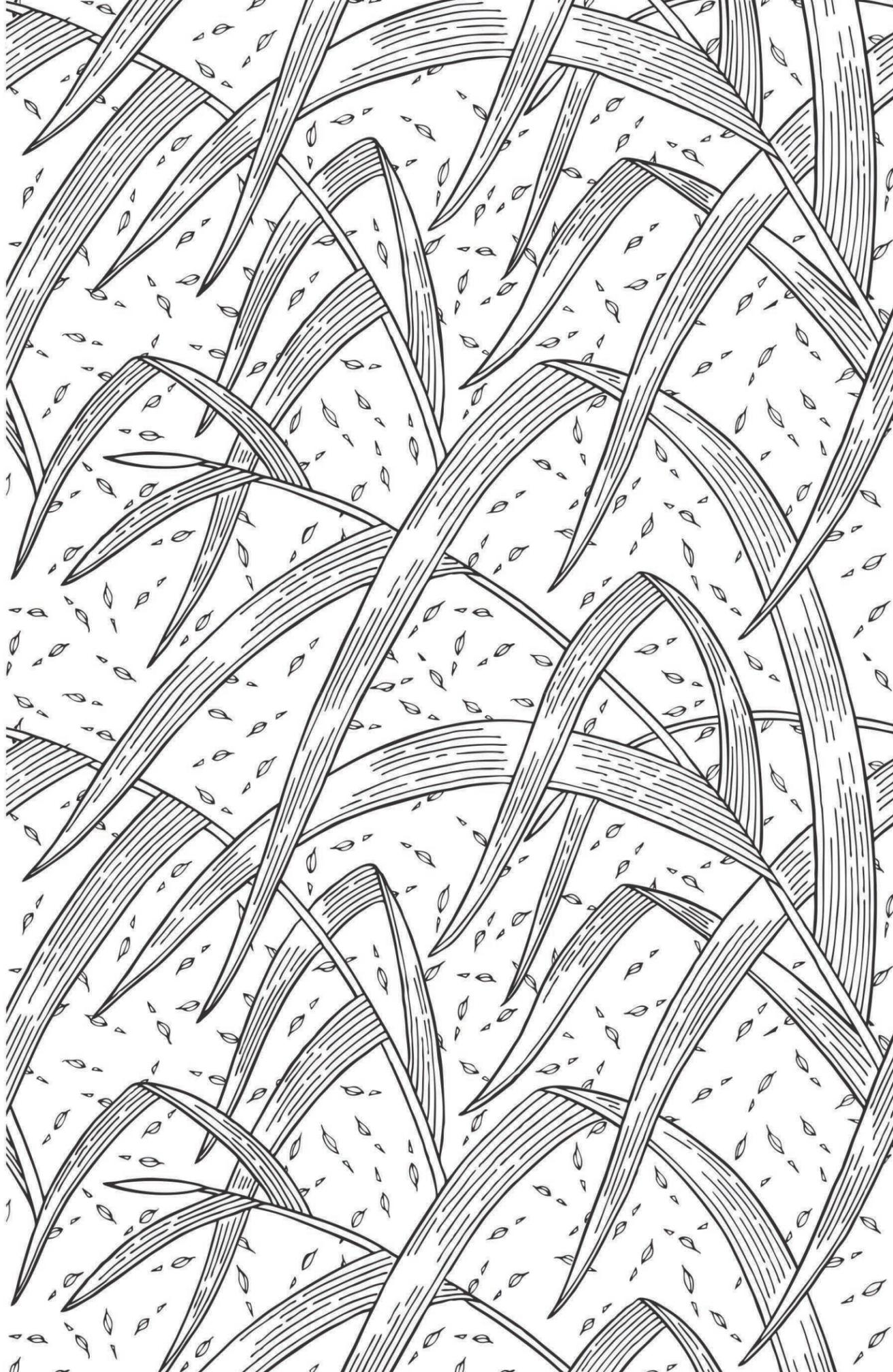
Many of the larger islands are heaps, fitfully huddled together.

Mudskippers are amphibious things. They look goofy and confused. They are hardy and territorial. There is no better totem animal for the bickering, bustling archipelago.

Yet they figure so little in our myths or beliefs. Maybe thinking of their import draws their attention—and, well, there is really no need to wake them.

There is a single temple at the mouth of the Linggi River, filled with incense, whose prayers are dedicated to the Tectonic Mudskippers. To their continued, sound rest.

And so they are sleeping, now. They do tend to twitch, once in a while. The ones on the islands' edges are tickled by deep, volcanic fires.



## Quick Lovegrass

Hold it. Look at your tracksuit pants, spiked all over with tiny spines. Your socks and shoes, also. Who asked you to go running through the field? You should have stuck to the path.

That field was full of Quick Lovegrass.

Quick Lovegrass is a nuisance. It has flowering stems that come up to your shins. It is quick because it grows very fast and grows everywhere; it grows in all sorts of conditions. It is good at propagating. It is topped with sharp, dart-like seeds.

When you brush against its stalk, its seeds stab into the cloth of your pants, then stick there. Quick Lovegrass seeds are black. You have to pluck them out: one, by one, by one. By one.

See what a nuisance it is? And make sure you get all of the seeds! Because of their colour, they are easy to miss.

If they get into your washing machine? With all the moisture, the seeds will germinate. Later, hanging on the line, stuck to your tracksuit pants in full sunlight, they take root. White filaments that stitch themselves into the fabric.

Now you are in trouble. Quick Lovegrass growing in textiles is finicky to unpick. It is not always possible.

You have to be careful. Do not just fold up your pants and put it away. Thoroughly check your whole load of laundry! The entire load might be affected.

If there is any Quick Lovegrass on any of the pieces—that is it. Your whole wardrobe, finished. Say goodbye to your whole cupboard.

Tomorrow you will open a drawer and find it full of grass: your pants and underwear, un-mown fields; leaves bursting from your socks; stalks thrust out of a shirt pocket, reaching upwards, waiting, topped with dart-like seeds.



## *Moustached Macaque*

Look at that monkey. He is being naughty. He has crept up to the picnicking family; he grabs a muesli bar from a bag.

Mischievous little thief! He scampers away, prize in hand. His victims noticed too late. He grins toothily, tumbles once, mounts a nearby tree stump. He hoots with glee, with triumph. His long whiskers bounce.

He is a Moustached Macaque. He and his troop live on the hill behind the park.

On either side of his mouth, on his upper lip, the Moustached Macaque sprouts hair in two tendrils, in the style of an orientalist's villain. His moustache makes him seem sage-like—you can almost imagine him stroke it.

His ancestors did.

Long ago, in the twilit morning of history, Moustached Macaques stroked their luxurious whiskers, and talked and thought, and debated all the wisdoms.

The new-formed peoples of humankind sought these monkeys out. In jungle clearings we aped their hand-gestures, their epigrams. They taught us the properties of wind; spell to ward against evil; how to appease the great spirits. They taught us the Five Foundations of Morality, the Seventy-seven Aphorisms.

Mostly they kept quiet, hunched in their trees, and we watched them consider truths. And one day, deep in their contemplation, the Moustached Macaques uncovered the Truth of all things.

Enlightened at last, serenely smiling—they left. They are one with creation now. So they are everywhere. Or maybe they are nowhere. It is all the same, to them.

They left their bodies behind. Their bodies lived and died, mated and multiplied. And thus, down through the years, down to that monkey. Look at him chew on his muesli bar.

He tosses the plastic wrapper. Throwing up his arms he topples over: screeching, uncaring, satisfied.

# Weeping Rain Tree

Hold on to my arm. The stones are slippery here.

Put your toes in the water. It is cool and fresh and clean, a clear pool—calm around the edges; pattered by an everlasting drizzle in its middle. In the middle is the tree.

The Weeping Rain Tree. It is 20 metres tall, but wider with its branches; it spreads over us like love. The sun plays shadow-puppetry with its bipinnate leaves. Its main arms are dripping. In places the flow forms curtains, pouring into the pond: long, flat waterfall tongues.

The Weeping Rain Tree keeps its taproot after germination. This grows as the tree matures, and digs deep into the ground, piercing stubborn, compacted soil. It drills through the water table.

The taproot draws up moisture. The suction is such that it draws up more than the Weeping Rain Tree really needs. So it gets rid of excess wet, via pores in its woody parts.

This tree is a natural pump, a living spring. Also an organic sieve, filtering out impurities. They were planted in rural communities, as a convenience. No need to trek to the river, with a Weeping Rain Tree weeping in the middle of the village.

Today, this village is a site for urban redevelopment. And this Weeping Rain Tree? A surprise difficulty. It is annoying the developers. Its moisture poses tricky drainage problems. There is no space for a water feature this big; this would be wasting valuable square footage.

Digging up the tree takes effort, because it is rooted so deep. Poison works, of course. But then the herbicide seeps downwards, and contaminates the aquifer.

# Stone Pangolin

Look, in front of the customs office, piled into neat pyramids like Portuguese-era cannon shot: Stone Pangolins.

A cross between anteater and artichoke, pangolins are silly-looking creatures. Walking on their hind legs, their clawed forearms cradled together, their noses close to the ground—they seem small, worried aunties: oh dear oh dear oh dear!

And, when their fears are founded? They curl into a tight ball, safe in keratin-plated hides: scales tough and sharp enough to frustrate tigers. The pangolin need only wait out the danger.

Of course, predatory man is also patient. Populations have been devastated by poaching and smuggling. Their meat a delicacy, their scales popularly said—what else is new?—to increase virility. All pangolin species are near-extinct.

Except this one. The Stone Pangolin.

It is named for its armour, extra tough to be truly invulnerable. It is too difficult to butcher, too uneconomical to kill.

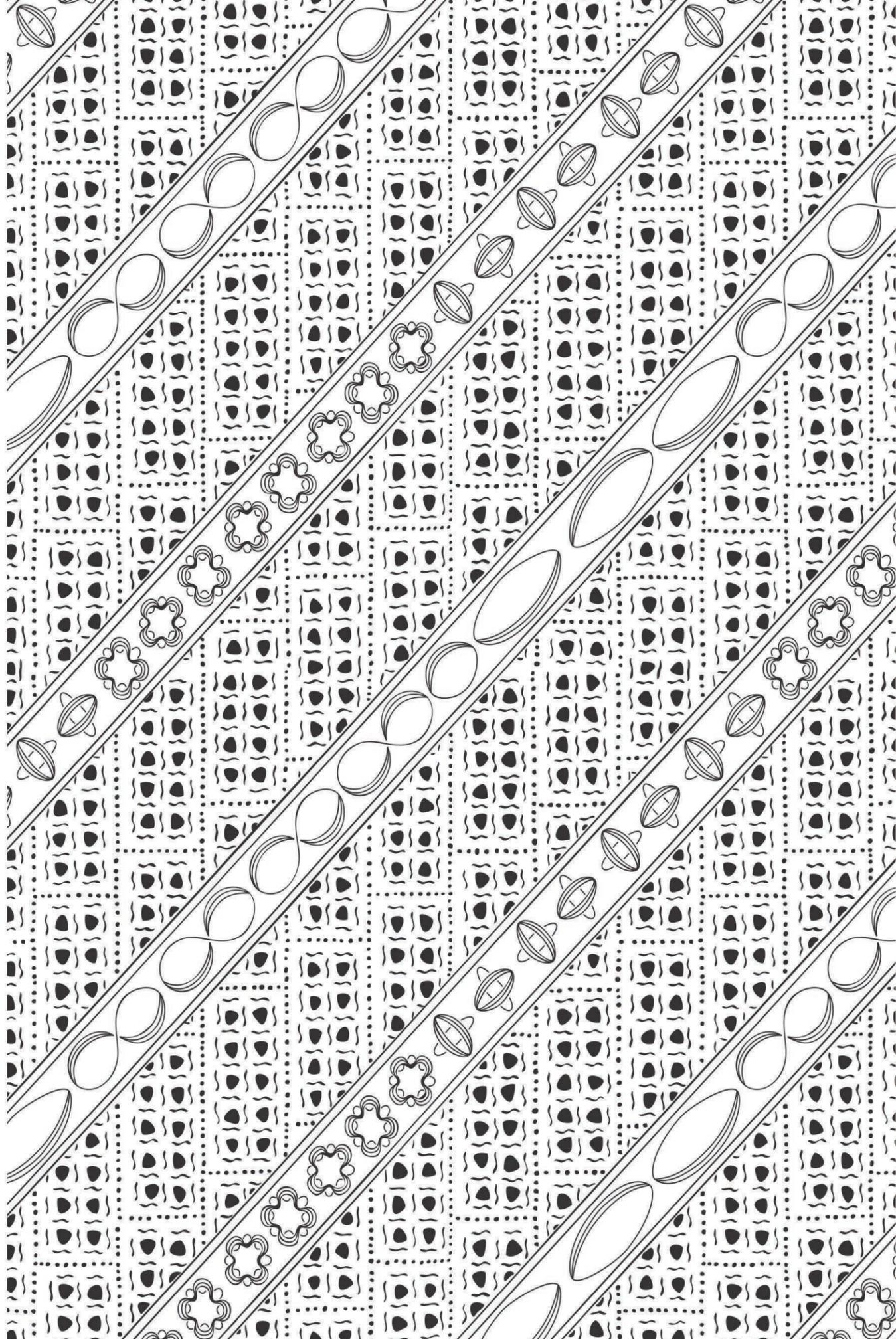
See, this one here, curled up—see how its scales are scored, by machete-strokes? And that one there, scorched by fire?

Hunters have tossed them into kilns; scientists have starved them of air, placed them in autoclaves. A Russian mission exposed one to the vacuum of space for three hours.

That one survived. Almost all of them do. They fall into some sort of suspended state. Hyper-hibernation. You would need specialised equipment to detect their glacial breathing, the geologic tick of their heart rate.

The Stone Pangolin was identified in 1925, in Borneo. Originally thought dead, that first specimen sits in a glass case in the British Museum. It is not dead. It waits—like all of its species that has encountered us—for the danger of humankind to disappear.





## Perfect Saga

Hold the little red seed in the palm of your hand. It is round, shaped like a fat clam; like an opaque triangular dipyrnidal gem, worn to smoothness over a hundred years.

When you hold it like this? It is difficult to describe how you feel, exactly.

You feel a sense of exactness. The seed feels light. It feels right. It seems to tell you that the world is right: made of discrete, fixed parts; multitudinous, but quantifiable; rational and comprehensible.

The seed is a Perfect Saga seed. It is found throughout the tropics, and comes in a pod, along with ten of its sisters. All slightly different in shape. But curiously consistent in weight.

They are a symbol of ideal love in China. Indian goldsmiths use them on trading scales. In the late 18th Century, a French adventurer sailed home from Puducherry, entranced, a little red seed in the palm of his hand.

Today, that same seed sits in a small bell jar, in a safe, in a vault under the Pavillon de Breteuil. It serves humanity as the international prototype gram—the gram on which all other grams in the world are based.

There is controversy over this. Some radicals believe such an organic standard is inherently unreliable. More suitable alternatives have been suggested. A platinum-iridium cylinder-block, properly machined, maybe?

But once you start to deal with metallurgy and manufacture, you start to ask questions about precision. About the fallibility of human tools. About fidelity down to the subatomic level—and there you get inconstant masses, imaginary particles, impossible things that are both yes-no.

Better to stay safe with the Perfect Saga seed, the sense of correctness it lends you, so red and pretty in the palm of your hand.



**Trương Minh Quý**

*How Green the Calabash Garden Was*, film, sound, 15', 2016. Courtesy of the artist. Photographer: Lê Văn Hoàng © Trương Minh Quý

## Trương Minh Quý: A Vietnamese on Mars

*Since 2012, Trương Minh Quý has become a part of new generation of Southeast Asian filmmakers whose works have been shown at international film festivals and art spaces. Similar to his contemporaries, Trương's works explore the history of his nation's political troubles and its effect on the present generation. It is different in that the artist explores the notion of history and its legacy through the lens of political ecology.*

Interviewer: **Graiwoot Chulphongsathorn**

Interviewee: **Trương Minh Quý**

Translator: **Nhân Nguyễn**



**Trương Minh Quý**

*The Tree House*, a film still from the production, with Trương Minh Quý (with glasses) and the film's director of photograph, Sơn Đoàn, 2018. Courtesy of the artist. Photographer: Lêna Bùi © Trương Minh Quý

**D**ad, I'm calling you from Mars, 54.6 million kilometers away from home. The emptiness found in nature here, its endless unfolding of red deserts interspersed by intermittent memories. Those memories that stopped before the beginning of the photographs. *The Tree House* (2019)

The screen is black. We hear a voice of a Vietnamese filmmaker telling a story of a Vietnamese man who lives on Mars and plans to shoot a documentary there. An image appears and we see a young toddler wearing Indigenous clothes, walking around inside a house that is perched on a mountaintop. The narrator says that the Vietnamese man on Mars wants to test his camera and immediately the film cuts to strange footage, presented with a negative photographic image. Is it Mars? Then, the film cuts to a long take shot of an Indigenous woman standing in front of a cave. She speaks Ruc language. She was born in this cave and still remembers the day she arrived in this world. She points to a rock her mother placed her on. She recalls the moment her sister wrapped her up with dried tree barks.

Personal, poetic, experimental, and moving across-genres, the films of 30-year-old Vietnamese filmmaker Trương Minh Quý challenge conventions of Southeast Asian studies and open new futures for moving image productions in the region. Trương has already made a dozen short and two feature-length films, and is currently studying under the artistic mentorship of Hungarian film master Béla Tarr at Le Fresnoy, National Studio of Contemporary Arts in France. Yet, what matters to

me most is not only the stylistic quality of his films, but also the fact that his work can be considered an entry point into the intersection between two areas rarely studied together: Southeast Asian art cinemas and the Anthropocene.

Since Apichatpong Weerasethakul launched his first feature, *Mysterious Object at Noon* (2000), Southeast Asian art cinema has enjoyed a highly-successful status as a sub category in the global moving image production. Here, I use the term *art cinema* loosely, as a way to refer to the region's mode of alternative film production, famous for experimental aesthetics, and which has circulated through film festivals and art spaces, resulting in internationally-acclaimed auteur directors such as Weerasethakul, Lav Diaz (Philippines), Brillante Mendoza (Philippines), Rithy Panh (Cambodia), and Garin Nugroho (Indonesia). While studies have approached these films from various research frameworks, lacking thus far has been ecocinema scholarship – that is, the study of these films from an ecological perspective. This absence emerges from the historic conventions of Southeast Asian studies which have tended to prioritise human cultural notions – human histories, politics, and to a lesser extend gender, sexuality, and class – whereas environmental notions have been relegated to the background.

However, Anthropocene studies and the current posthuman/ontological turns in the Humanities are gradually eroding a nature/culture divide imposed by various orders of modernity, and are beginning to challenge several disciplines in Southeast Asia. It's not a coincidence that anthropologists in Thailand invited The French anthropologist known for his book *Beyond Nature and Culture* Philippe Descola to give a keynote lecture in Bangkok, or that an art center in Singapore curated a show, the first time in Southeast Asia, for the eco-artist Tomás Saraceno.<sup>1</sup> This volume of *Antennae* Journal of Nature in Visual Cultures is also part of this challenge, as was the 2019 Asian Cinema Studies Society Conference, held at Singapore's LASALLE College of the Arts under the theme *The Environments of Asian Cinemas*. Also included in this change is *Animistic Apparatus*, an experimental outdoor film screening, curated by May Adadol Ingawanij, exploring ecologies of humans and nonhumans in Southeast Asia which are also featured in this volume.<sup>2</sup>

And yet while the Anthropocene, and posthumanist discourse may be relatively recent, a deep engagement in ecologies of Southeast Asia by art cinemas is not entirely new. Many filmmakers have been exploring this topic for decades. While many scholars focus on the temporalities of the cinema of Lav Diaz (understandable, because of the unusual 4-to-11-hour length of his films), his work also explores the environmental landscapes of the Philippines, from a land under the threat of colonialism in *A Lullaby to a Sorrowful Mystery* (2016), to a space ravaged by disastrous typhoon in *Death in the Land of Encantos* (2007). Likewise, from features like *Tropical Malady* (2004) and *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2010) to his installation piece *Primitive* (2009) and a film performance *Fever Room* (2015), the intermediary cinema of Apichatpong Weerasethakul presents cinematic landscapes in which the entangled contemporary lifeworlds of humans, animals, myths, spirits, technology, and geopolitics interconnect. Not limited to the works of the masters and star auteurs like Diaz and Weerasethakul, ecological themes exist in many works by the rising young filmmakers of the region. The critically-acclaimed *Nervous Translation* (2017) by Filipino Shireen Seno juxtaposes child-like worldviews and a nostalgia for the pre-digital era with an environmental disaster, and the Locarno International Film Festival Golden Leopard winning *A Land Imagined* (2018) by Singaporean Yeo Siew Hua investigates an underworld of migrant workers while questioning the island nation's land reclamation project and dependency upon sand.

This context brings me to this interview and the ecocinemas of Trương Minh Quý. While other young Southeast Asian filmmakers I come across in my research may have two or three films that engage directly with ecological themes, Trương's film catalogue is entirely dedicated to intersecting political ecologies in Vietnam.<sup>3</sup> What is more, Trương does not limit his films to one specific issue; rather, each work deals with different facets of political ecologies in the context of Vietnam. His first-

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 How are we supposed to own something that no longer exists? Home is an extraordinary entity. It is worldly when we speak of it in architectural terms, about its materials, utility, or location; but beyond its worldly existence, it is the space-time of an altogether different world made of a substance with the likeness of air or water whose fabric held together by the many interlacing currents of life events.  
 .....

ever short film, *A Raw Video* (2012) was edited from footage of a journey during which he encountered and learned about the lives and histories of ethnic minorities in Vietnam. His next short, *Someone is Going to Forest* (2013), re-enacts and re-imagines local news coverage of the murder of small-time wood smugglers in a jungle, and links the case with a forest myth from indigenous folklore. Trương's other short film, *How Green the Calabash Garden Was* (2016), is more ambitious and thought-provoking, as Trương presents a story of a Vietnamese veteran who lived through the Cambodian genocide. Yet, instead of limiting stories to the past or the present, Trương brings human histories of the region together with memories of the planet embedded in, for example lava rocks. Trương's most acclaimed work thus far is a trilogy, which features two shorts, *Mars in the Well* (2014) and *The City of Mirror* (2015), as well as a feature-length film, *The City of Mirror: A Fictional Biography* (2016). The three films present a speculative vision of Vietnam in 2053, a year in which the country is submerged underwater and its citizens become climate refugees who must move to higher altitudes for survival. These three low-budget cli-fi experiences become spaces in which the personal meets both the political and the ecological, as Trương casts his parents and himself as the films' protagonists. Trương's latest film is *The Tree House* (2019). This most recent ambitious project was shot entirely with a 16mm camera (a rare mode of production in contemporary Southeast Asian film) and explores memories of ethnic minorities who once lived in caves and forests but were forced out of their original homes to live in man-made houses. The film which Trương considers a documentary is hybridized with experimental film forms as Trương mixes the film's narrative with the story of a Vietnamese man living on Mars, a theme he also explores in his previous films. The result is a cinematic mediation on the nature of media and memories, a journey into the deep past and the speculative future.

In this interview, I will introduce Trương's films one by one to assist readers who have not had a chance to see them. At the same time I engage Trương specifically on issues concerning: first, the relationship between humans and nonhumans and the cinematic presence of nonhumans in his films; second, his position as an artist as a person who lives, witnesses and is influenced by the socio-politico-environmental changes in Vietnam; third, the role of animism, a topic usually subordinated in western knowledge of the Anthropocene, but which Trương engages with depth; fourthly, I trace the various temporal dimensions that he often plays with, and finally his perspective as a Southeast Asian artist on the ecological crises faced by the region.

**Graiwoot Chulphongsathorn:** Let me start with a basic, yet very important topic: your home. A house, a sense of home, and a sense of family are the central topics in nearly all of your films. You use your home as a film setting. However, it is not a lifeless background for your story. Perhaps the way you treat your home in your films resonates with what Jane Bennett (2010) describes as a vibrant matter in a sense that the house is an active assemblage of relationships from which stories, fantasies, and encounters between humans and the nonhumans arise.<sup>4</sup> Although many filmmakers have made films about their homes, what interests me specifically, in your case, is that your home is situated in an environmental area, and that you include this environment as part of the house. Indeed in your films, we cannot easily distinguish the house from the land and the trees around the house. In fact, in *Someone is Going to Forest*, there is a sequence where the trees from the outside enter, grow and transform your house into a unique environment. Could you describe your home and the area around your home? What are the characteristics and the political tension of the environment in that area? And, why do you keep returning to film the area?

**Trương Minh Quý:** For most of us, it is customary to think of a home as property: my home, your home, or theirs, and apparently not many out there remain ownerless for long. Yet ironically, home – the real home – may not have existed after all. Even if it might survive somehow, then only as an altered form of what it used to be but not

anymore, a ruinous leftover of the home that was already lost and gone: (our) childhood home.

How are we supposed to own something that no longer exists? Home is an extraordinary entity. It is worldly when we speak of it in architectural terms, about its materials, utility, or location; but beyond its worldly existence, it is the space-time of an altogether different world made of a substance with the likeness of air or water whose fabric held together by the many interlacing currents of life events. In a sense, home is more temporal than spatial; home is the transition of times/time within a space – a personal, utmost intimate space: a country dwelling, a bedroom, an attic.

My home was built in the typical fashion of Vietnamese urban architecture: tiny, narrow, three-story-tall, a street-facing house surrounded by many other tiny ones. In earnest, it is a rough-looking house, if not straight-out ugly. It lies near the downtown quarter of Buôn Ma Thuột, a city in the Central Highlands of Vietnam famous for its coffee cultivation and exportation. My parents used to own a coffee ranch in which there was a small house, that I once documented in my films. What is worth noting is that of this town and all Central Highlands as a whole, the land itself does not belong to the Kinh people (the majority ethnicity to which I belong, which makes up 90% of Vietnamese population). The land actually belongs to ethnic minorities like the Ede and the Jarai. After the end of the Vietnam-American War in 1975, the Kinh people migrated to this place, following the New Economic Zones program drafted by the government. Arable and fertile, for the Kinh, it was the promised land filled with life-changing prospects. Yet, in this process of bringing this vast upland under governmental authority, its native dwellers were cast aside, becoming the minority in their own country. Forests became scarce and the remaining forested lands became barren. Hydroelectric dams siphoned the life out of the Srepok River, one of the Mekong River's major tributaries. The culture of the ethnic minorities was sadly diminished because of the ostentatious catering to visitors, which resulted in the most vacuous forms of tourism. Here the underlying tensions of everyday life are evident. In a Jarai village, I visited and filmed, children, are born fatherless; while alcoholism and suicide are pandemics among the youth. The future for people here feels like an impoverished dent of the past, and to live is to get by with losses and repression.

**GC:** The presence of the land links to the next topic: the forest. Many Southeast Asian filmmakers, including you, make films in which the forest is a central actor in the narrative. There is a forest in your first short film *A Raw Video*, in which you filmed people on a mountain. In *Someone is Going to Forest*, the forest is treated as a scene of crime where a murder takes place; a land where small-scale timbers are exploited; a place that is ruled by animistic power. In another short film *Deja Vu*, the forest is a labyrinth. In your first feature *The City of Mirrors: A Fictional Biography*, the forest, and the mountain become places where people live and work after Vietnam is submerged by a speculative environmental crisis. And, in your latest feature *The Tree House*, you document people who once lived in caves and trees in the forest. Can you explain why the forest fascinates you, and why you keep returning to the forest?

**TMQ:** A legend about the origin of the Kinh people has it that a long time ago, the mythological king Lạc Long Quân was married to an immortal called Âu Cơ. Later she gave birth to a sac containing a hundred eggs which later hatched into a hundred children both male and female. One day Lạc Long Quân told his wife, "I descended from dragons, you from immortals. We are as incompatible as water is with fire. So we cannot continue to live in harmony." Thenceforth the pair broke up, each went their separate ways; one half of their children made up their minds to follow their father to the sea, while the rest returned to the mountain with their mother.

Like a warning, this legend seems to foretell the deeply divided fate of Vietnamese people. But what really piqued my interest in that story was the relationship between Water (the sea) and Earth (forest and mountain). In other stories, Water is often portrayed as a villain who sows havoc and destruction upon the peaceful life of

the people, the antagonistic counterpart to the protagonist Earth, which is personified as the good-natured protector of human lives. Perhaps I must have been a descendant from those 50 sons and daughters who followed the immortal mother to the mountain. Being in the mountain and the forests never fails to impact me in the most profound and, intimate way; under the jungle's dazzling warmth, feeling my moistened skin on humid summer days and the delicious coolness of streams and brooks. It's like some kind of primordial consciousness almost reverted itself back to the caves that humans used to call home.

The jungle (or forest) is a lively, organic world, complex in its temper but in a sense also welcoming. It is an open world that can cover up or erase all traces of anything that ventures into it. It also carries within the potent force of destruction, stoically silent and more enduring than Water.

My own exploration of the jungle came about during my late teens. It started with those camping trips overnight, near the waterfall with my friends. The forest, especially the night forest, from that time on enticed my being, not without a certain fear, the kind of fear one gets when one swims through a dark, deep swamp, knowing not but always on the edge for all sorts of unknown lurking dangers, crocodiles for example. That my films often feature both forest and city is simply because this reflects the very reality of my daily life. My home is located at the center of the city but is surrounded by the forest. The transition back and forth between those places is also an attempt for me to connect and discover the complexities of one space through contemplating the other: of the forest through the city, and vice versa.

**GC:** In *Someone is Going to Forest*, the presence of the forest is complex and multi-layered. Narratively, the film starts with a forest's gaze or a forest's point of view. Through your voice's whispering, you play the role of the forest who sees the death of people who come to smuggle the wood out of the forest. Then, the film shifts to the point of view of a writer, also played by you, who records his experience of escaping from the forest. And finally, the film switches to the forest's gaze again. In terms of the content, the film is inspired by real news of people murdered in the forest while seeking some kind of timber. At the same time, this same forest is also a sacred forest for minority ethnic peoples of the region. It seems to me that in this forest, the ecological intertwines with the political and the animistic. Can you talk about the news story which inspired the film – why is this case important to you? And can you talk about the folkloric aspect of this particular forest?

**TMQ:** The incident happened around March, 2013 in a forest region adjacent to the border between Quang Tri (Vietnam) and Savannakhet (Laos). While looking for Agarwood (a fragrant type of wood, expensive and rare), a group of seven persons got kidnapped for ransom by three strangers.<sup>5</sup> Only two made it out alive, while the other five were brutally murdered.

This news was widely discussed for some time, mostly because of the monstrously inhumane aspect of the murders, which fed into morbid curiosity amongst media consumers as often happens with such incidents. As I picked up the news in the newspaper, I recall all the nights I and my friends had spent sleeping in the forest, all around us were shadows and the susurrations of water. The fire provided scant warmth, its light only half revealed the faces around us, it was the fear of what lies within the shadow: a soul, a murderer, a beast... Or perhaps it's the fear of nothingness, not a newborn fear but has its roots in history. The shadow of the night forest, the primordial terror of our human ancestors.

The murder made me think of other crimes that might have occurred deep inside the forest. What drives humans toward committing those unforgivable, inhumane acts? Was there any connection at all between the location of the incident (the forest) and the human psyches of those murderers?

Having killed five people, those murderers fled into a cave in the haunted forest, an ideal location for them because nobody dared to set foot onto this place. It was



**Trương Minh Quý**

*Someone is Going to Forest*, film, sound, 29', 2013. Courtesy of the artist. Photographer: Trương Minh Quý

© Trương Minh Quý

a graveyard for the dead that lies remote from the village, so as to prevent the souls of the dead from ever wandering back to their old houses. The ethnic minorities, like the Jarai from the Central Highlands, are scared of the deceased returning. After finally delivering the dead to their resting place, the relatives of those that passed away would return to the village by another route and attempt to fool the ghosts. Hence it is believed that the haunted forest is where the spirits live.

From the horrific details of those murderers and their ghostly hideout, we could chart out these stirring images: cave-forest-people-spirits, certain transpositions of roles, mentalities, and persona must have happened there between living beings, the material, and the spiritual realm. And it was that forest the converging point of all things. In this aspect, the forest was like a narrator or a creator of the story.

**GC:** This is what I like about your film. As a film scholar whose area of interest is the forest in cinema, I agree with you that we should not treat the forest as a lifeless background for human stories. Instead, the forest has agency. In your films and other global art films such as the work by Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Japanese filmmaker Naomi Kawase, the forest is presented as a network, an ecosystem. But, this version of ecosystem surpasses the familiar scientific definition of the word. The network/ecosystem includes humans and nonhumans; being and non-being; the material, the cultural, and the spiritual. In a way, the forest can be perceived as a site where the fixed identity of humans is called into question. This interpretation of the forest can link to the field of more-than-human ethnography, such as the work by Eduardo Kohn, whose research is about the system of belief and cosmologies among the Runa people in Avila, Ecuador.<sup>6</sup>

I want to shift from a local incident as depicted in *Someone is Going to Forest* to a historical event– the Khmer Rouge genocide. The film in your catalogue that deals directly with this is *How Green the Calabash Garden Was*. Many filmmakers/artists from Vietnam and Cambodia have made films about the effect and the legacy of the war. I wonder if, for you, you also feel that this is a duty or something that you consciously need to carry, as a Vietnamese artist? Or, have you just made the film about the subject because of your intuition?

**TMQ:** It could be said that *How Green the Calabash Garden Was* is my first direct confrontation against history, the creation was quite a coincidence. Trần Xuân Vê, who is a war veteran, was a friend, and a drinking buddy of my father; as his farm was not far from ours. They hung out with each other quite often. So I got the opportunity to tag along on one of such occasions. Feeling inebriated after some drinks, suddenly he started reminiscing about his days serving the army in Cambodia, about all spectacles himself witnessed: miles of dead bodies, gargantuan frogs of the size of a sewer rat, wriggling eels nestling among rotting human carcasses. Even 20 years later, he still swears off eating frog and eel.

As I listened to his intermittent recollections, I felt as if something was stirring up within me: a gut feeling, an impression, distress. The fate of a person might have been determined by what they had seen, and sometimes the present is shadowed by the lingering spectres of the past. Here the spectres took the form of the usual, mundane things in our daily life, like the frogs and eels. I wonder with all these filming tools and devices, might we be able to recapture, to put ourselves into other person's perspective? And if we were to do this, would the felt emotions retain their pressing immediacy, instead of being diluted, compromised?

As you said, perhaps this film does rely on an intuitive approach, an effort in search of a satisfactory answer to quell my own unrests and disquiet. History is an entity/a character that dwells somewhere in the grey zone between the seen and the shadowy unseen, it is undying and always in motion, and to seize it in the process of filmmaking demands the audacity to rise above the shallow dualism of either subjectivity or objectivity.

Born fifty years after the Vietnam War (1975) came to an end, four years after the Vietnamese free-market economic reforms, I think the histories I have traced are inevitably radically different from the approach of the previous generation of filmmakers, many of whom were also enlisted soldiers or whose lives span through the war-torn periods filled with government's propaganda films. This difference is precisely due to the distance between myself and these events. I feel no need to justify or plead for anything, any individual, or to take part in any side or cause in order to have a perspective.

Similar to many other young artists, our interpretations of history resist *that singular history*, that indoctrination of our school days. Just as you said, a work of history is a duty and a responsibility; but a responsibility to nothing but ourselves as artists: a responsibility for our own freedom.

**GC:** *How Green the Calabash Garden Was* doesn't just retell the experience of the war veteran. You didn't just show an image of the veteran talking about his memories. Instead, what you try to focus on is ways in which his memories are linked with the image of nature—he spoke vividly about the road and the ditch next to the forest where hundreds of dead bodies were sprawled out; about the animals, especially the eels and frogs, that eat the corpses. These ecologies of war imprinted on his mind. At the same time, there are also other natural elements: a Calabash garden that the veteran owns, and a volcanic area that is not far from the Calabash garden.

In my opinion, the film corresponds with the temporal analysis in the concept of the Anthropocene, in which Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009) provokes us to think of the collapse of the age-old distinction between human history and the planet's history (but without reducing either to essence).<sup>7</sup> Our human histories, however impactful they are,

are just tiny elements when thinking of them from a planetary/geological scale of time. In my opinion, this dualism of human/earth history is presented through three types of lands in this film. The first is the land changed by the Khmer Rouge war; the land where the dead bodies were put into. Later, with the help of the animals, the bodies slowly decomposed and were recomposed as part of the land. The second type is the land around the volcanic area, in which the memories of the mountain are preserved inside the masses of lava rocks. This land represents planetary time, a mode of time that is much larger than the human experience of time. Finally, the land of the Calabash garden, where the war veteran grows the calabash in order to earn his life, suggests the time of the present moment. In this film, it shows that Vietnamese lands appear to possess these three modes of temporalities: human history, planetary history, and the now. I wonder whether my interpretation is close to your original intention?

*I believe this convergence actually brings the memories of nature into the realm of the animate; nature's memories, personalized, after having found a space to exist within the war veteran's mind, they come into being.*

**TMQ:** Your interpretation was quite accurate, for what I seek is a connection between history/personal memories and history/nature's memory. The memories of a person are always evolving, in the sense that they have to find a way to adapt to the present. In my film, it seems that the old war veteran is now almost a stranger to his aging, distant memories. He has become the witness of his history. Perhaps the distance between the man and his memories is his own way to salvage his humanity after all the gruesome evils he had seen so that one day (after nearly 20 years) he might be able to eat frogs and eels again, a way for him to reconcile somehow with his daily life. By the veteran's own words, "interesting it might be, those memories as a war veteran no longer have any bearing or necessity on my life as it is now".

One of those hot spots for tourism in Saigon is the War Remnants Museum with millions of visitors annually. Yet it is also where memories of many war-time atrocities, are commoditized, reconditioned into objects of display. Casually exposed in such a neutered space, they lie there day by day in tableaux so sterile of thoughts or emotions.

At the same time, what we have here are also the memories of nature, like that of the volcano in the film. 60 kilometers away from the veteran's home, amid a vast rocky expanse, the longest lava rift cave in Southeast Asia was recently discovered. The memories of this volcano remain in its geologic constituents; were its properties to be analyzed, we could trace its origin back to millions of years ago.

What is interesting then, is the converging area between nature's memories and human's memories. Just as you said, images of the countryside, the empty roads, the forest, the animals... have found their way into the war veteran's memories. I believe this convergence actually brings the memories of nature into the realm of the animate; nature's memories, personalized, after having found a space to exist within the war veteran's mind, they come into being.

As for the calabash garden, it is the war veteran's garden. When I went there to make the film, I was astonished – stunned – at the splendid abundance of the garden, because all my previous visits were around either after the harvest, or when the garden hasn't fully bloomed. It is peculiar that in the garden's greenery, the water's freshness, the murmurs of cicadas, all I see there is the thriving vitality of life in total contrast with the veteran's memories about the war, yet after the screening, some of the viewers made a disconcerting analogy between the image of the piled-up green calabashes and the piling dead bodies in the veteran's stories. I wonder whether or not even in the most mundane of images, there still lurks the haunting spectre of death and the past?

**GC:** Let's move to discuss your trilogy (if I can call it): *Mars in the Well* (co-directed with a French comic artist Freddy Nadolny Poustochkine), *The City of Mirrors*, and *The City of Mirrors: A Fictional Biography*. These three films are linked by the same premise, that is, the imagination/speculation of the future of Vietnam, a time in which Vietnam is submerged by the water due to the climate crisis, causing many Vietnamese citizens to go to live on Mars. The three films are also applied by the same directing concept—that you cast yourself, your grandmother, and your parents as the protagonists for each film, respectively.



### Trương Minh Quý

Trương Minh Quý and Freddy Nadolny Poustochkine *Mars in the Well*, film, sound, 19', 2014. Courtesy of the artist and Freddy Nadolny Poustochkine. Photographer: Freddy Nadolny Poustochkine © Trương Minh Quý

The three films are so rich in terms of content and style, but there are two aspects that I want to concentrate on. First, the scale of time. The way I see it, many Southeast Asian filmmakers are stuck in the (not-so-far) past or the present. Apart from the films of Filipino filmmaker Kidlat Tahimik, the deepest or the furthest that the story goes in most Southeast Asian films is to deal with the past and the present of his/her nation. It is rare to find films that explore times before nation-building or a time after nationhood as we know it.

In contrast, in your trilogy, the scale of time is so massive. The three films are set in the year 2048 where you propose that Vietnam would be submerged and the Vietnamese must travel to live on Mars. 2048 isn't so long in the future. However, at the same time, the film also recalls the land of Vietnam before the national era. Yet, the film also carries the sense of today from the fact that you present your future world by filming Vietnam in the present (instead of using visual effects to create the future world). In this respect, the past-present-future dimensions in your films overlap. While the films dare to imagine the future of Vietnam (where Vietnam does not have much future left because of the submergence), the films still reveal moments where audiences are able to think of Vietnam's traumatic past and the fragile present. There is a sequence in *The City of Mirrors: A Fictional Biography* that evokes what I describe. The sequence starts with your mother watching a news broadcast about a martyr in Vietnam's history (in a way it refers to the time of national history). Then it

cuts to a river and rocks, in which a villager tells a primitive story to your father (the time of pre-nation). After that, it turns out that this river and waterfalls are contaminated, and the film follows with a shot of garbage floating on the river, which reminds the viewers that this natural scenery is, in fact, the submerged Vietnam (the time of post-nation/the planetary time).

**TMQ:** The future is for me the potentiality of being. The future world from those films you mentioned is wholly different from the world, as it is often portrayed and perpetuated by Hollywood movies, as a sci-fi dystopia dominated by technology. Movies and other media outlets like that are still influencing and narrowing both the scope and the vision we have about our future even today. Yet if we raise this question to ourselves: what and how much do we actually know about what awaits us in the future? For most of us, the answer is of vagueness and uncertainty: little do we truly know the future, if at all. This sense of uncertainty is what gave rise to my film. It is clear that all of our futuristic musings have their roots in the reality of the past and the present. For example, the journeys to *Mars in Mars in the Well* were reactions against the New Economic Zones program of Vietnam's government from the 70s to 90s, where parts of Central Highlands and other remote provinces in Vietnam came under more direct political control and were exploited for profits. The conquering of Mars here might be interpreted as a forced implementation of a delusional utopian politics, and the combination of these false politics ideal and the soon-to-be-flooded reality of Vietnam is as contradictory as it is ironic.

An interesting little footnote: in Vietnamese, the distinction between tenses is loosely tied in, rather than being clear-cut like in English or other languages. A same verb could be employed and attributed to the present, the future, or the past. Perhaps as a Vietnamese with a different temporal sense, I could not help but think of the future as something with its deep-seated symptoms already inherent in the present.

**GC:** The other aspect that is outstanding in the three films is the emotions in the characters. Whether the character has a chance to go to Mars (like the main character in *Mars in the Well*), or is left alone on earth (like the characters in *The City of Mirrors* and *The City of Mirrors: A Fictional Biography*), they are all presented as being, what I would call, climate refugees. They are people who have lost their homes due to the climate crisis, or, for the ones who still can stay in their homes, the places are ruined by the effect of the environmental degradation. Solastalgia is an academic term for ecological grief of this type of situation. It is clear to me that these characters carry climate trauma with them. One sequence that represents this theme best is the last sequence of *The City of Mirrors: A Fictional Biography*. In that sequence, your home is flooded by the water. This water does not only submerge the nation but the memories and the spirits of the people are also drowned by the ecological phenomenon. Could you talk about the tone in the film that you want to convey?

**TMQ:** The scene in the epilogue in *The City of Mirrors: A Fictional Biography*, when the whole city sank underwater because of the deluge, was inspired by *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. There is a chapter that describes a five-year-long deluge that drowned the Macondo village, with its banana plantations and animal farms, and the human bodies growing moldy and covered by seaweed.

In the film, these climate refugees, made homeless by the rising flood, had to retreat again and again to the higher places, and eventually onto Mars. But what is interesting here to me is that despite submerging everything, water also has such a preserving effect that even the most mundane assortment of things, after being underwater for a while, would likely gain for itself an illustrious beauty of some ancient splendors. An underwater city always echoes ancient cities found only in myths, water has its peculiar way of drawing everything back to a past long-gone, hence making that past tangible to the senses. I want the audience to feel the depth and breadth



**Trương Minh Quý**

*The City of Mirrors: A Fictional Biography*, film, sound, 87', 2016. Courtesy of the artist. Photographer: Lê Văn Hoàng © Trương Minh Quý

out of each and every facet of these cities paradoxical as it might seem.

**GC:** I believe, one crucial aspect that your films represent is a perspective from a Southeast Asian people on a dialogue about climate crisis/the Anthropocene. This perspective is very important because the conversation on the Anthropocene is dictated by the West – western scientists, western politicians, western artists, despite the fact that there is no East or West in a climate crisis. What do you think about your role as a non-Western filmmaker who speaks about the climate issue?

**TMQ:** There is something contradictory here: Even when it is in plain view that Vietnam is soon to be one of the first countries to bear the catastrophic brunt of climate change: yet the discourse, itself has become a polemical subject, inseparable from the narrative of Western countries. A local discourse is almost absent here, or only happening far away from the spotlight. Climate change in my eyes is recognizably the loss of what we hold dear: it is the scenery, the memories, the people. I look at it not as an outsider, but as a *victim*, experiencing all of its abject rawness of the senses.<sup>8</sup> I belong to the losses that will soon happen. That is how you can see in my films, the future always started off with the memories of my family and the destruction of my childhood home.

**GC:** What do you think about the role of film and any other visual medium in an ecological crisis? By the term “crisis”, I do not only mean the effect of the climate change as you explored in *Mars in the Well* and *The City of Mirrors*, but also am including other political-environmental challenges such as the minorities’ rights to land and water which you investigate in a Vietnamese context. What is the importance of the film medium for the crisis?

**TMQ:** For me *The City of Mirrors: A Fictional Biography* is a documentary film down to its bones and sinews: documenting. Under the fictional umbrella, what I meant to do by making this film was to preserve images and memories about my father and mother, my family, my home, and my country. Fiction is no more than a form to reach this ultimate purpose, then convey and release it. In a broader sense, documenting is an integral function for film of all genres. It is interesting the way you assert the role of film in correlation and relevance with ecological crisis. The making of film relies heavily on too many external elements and appendages: the electronics, technology, theater-specific environment,... Film is the most compromised out of all mediums there are. A work of art in its most traditional sense, like a sculpture, could still exist even under water, but film will be ruined. Your question could be understood as follows: what will be the role of art in a ravaged world? We all need to preserve our memories somehow, offering resistance against our time so short-lived, against the fleeting of our lives: we will have to find a way so that time can be seen. And for this, I believe that film is ready to do its share.

**GC:** One aspect in your films that fascinates me is the role of animism. Animism plays a major role in many Southeast Asian films (a horror genre in particular). Yet, the way you approach animism is non-horror.<sup>9</sup> You treat it as an old religion, or something that is nearly extinct but can be found only in the cultures of ethnic minorities. What’s more interesting is that you link animism and folktales to ecological crisis. For example, in *The City of Mirrors: A Fictional Biography*, while your character recounts that people in the old days could sleep under the waterfall and be protected by the gods of the waterfall, the same character also points out that the waterfall is now contaminated and the river has become a place for waste dumping. Do you realise that your films bring animism into productive dialogue with the age of environmental challenge?

**TMQ:** The features of animism and folktale in my films, *The City of Mirrors: A Fictional Biography*, for instance, have to do with many issues stemmed from reality (the environmental challenge is an example), in reality it just is. The tale, the myth of the Waterfall God in the film was narrated by Y-Thanh who is Ede, an ethnic minority residing in a village next to the river. I asked if he would like to tell us any stories related to this river, and quite naturally, in order to do so, he responded in his mother tongue. It was Y-Thanh who told us about the disappearance of the forest, the controlling of water by those hydro dams, and the forgetting of the traditions to which he himself and other Ede people belong. These word-of-mouth mythic tales and spiritual beliefs even in this woeful situation like this act as an anchor.

**GC:** I want to wind up the interview with your latest film *The Tree House*. While you play with the familiar theme in your filmography (such as family and houses), this time the subject is different because it is not about your house. Actually, it is about the idea of nature as a house because the film’s subjects are people who once lived in a cave and in a tree before they were forced, in the name of modernisation, to live in a man-made house. In this respect, the film implied that the pastoral image (of villagers who live in a small house in the country) is not only romanticised but, in fact, full of violence. These people were originally forced to leave their cave/forest homes. The film is so touching because you even bring some of these people back to the caves and trees that they once lived in when they were young. Could you talk about the reason that you want to record, and preserve the memories of these people?

**TMQ:** *The Tree House* has its origin from a vague image in my recollection, one that keeps recurring in my mind; a lone house in the mountain, deep in solitude that I happened to come across in one of my traveling trips long ago. It can be said that



**Trương Minh Quý**

*The City of Mirrors: A Fictional Biography*, film, sound, 87', 2016. Courtesy of the artist. Photographer: Lê Văn Hoàng © Trương Minh Quý



**Trương Minh Quý**

*The Tree House*, film still from the production, with the Ruc people in their cave in Quảng Bình, Vietnam, 2018. Courtesy of the artist.

Photographer: Lêna Bùi © Trương Minh Quý

the foundation of *The Tree House* is the abstraction of memory. Through the process of filmmaking, that abstraction became more precise and noticeable, with all people entering the scene. They all came from ethnic minorities living amid nature, like Hồ Văn Lang (from the Cor ethnic group), the so-called Vietnamese Tarzan who resides in a treehouse deep within the jungle; or Ms. Cao Thị Hậu from Ruc ethnicity, who spent her childhood in caves with her family. Through their stories and history, the notion of a House could be gradually seen, and its connections grow more enduring. If in other films, my childhood home is only the narrow, three-story one in Buôn Ma Thuột city, here in *The Tree House*, the childhood home of Ms. Cao Thị Hậu was the cave, the mountains, and forest. The notion of a childhood home was pushed to the limit: the childhood home that is the cradle of humanity. The toughest one of all difficulties that I had during the making of this film was to find the balance and the connection between a vague notion of a childhood home and its earthly, material existence. I got through this, thanks to the stories from Hồ Văn Lang and Cao Thị Hậu. They are almost like the witnesses from another space-time, where the notion of home is starkly different from ours. They appeared in front of the lens, gazing into it with their eyes, and we, the audience, replied.

**GC:** But *The Three House* is not a conventional documentary. Although the film's original concept began as a filmic record of people who once lived in caves/on trees, the final version of the film significantly evolves, both thematically and stylistically.

You even return to the narrative of Vietnamese on Mars explored in your past films. The way I see it, the film is the combination of the best elements in your work that we have discussed in this interview: the notion of homes, the multiple temporalities, the human and nonhuman histories, and the climate crisis.

Yet, I think this film goes to a deeper level than you have reached before. That is, the film gradually turns into a meditation on different ways in which humans, the earth, and the film medium all preserve memories. In the most beautiful sequence of the film, you stated "Our memories depend too much on images: photography. As for them [the Ruc ethnic minority], their memories are stories filled with imagination." In the film, you also show the double-sided features of photographic mediums. On the one hand, you explicitly criticize the film medium as a weapon of modernity toward the ethnic minorities. There is a scene of soldiers using cameras to capture the images of the Ruc people being forced out of their forest home. On the other hand, you demonstrate, by making this film, that the photographic medium can be a medium that preserves, acknowledges, and even experiments with what is soon to be lost – the old languages, the vulnerable memories. I'm wondering when you first developed this critical perspective on the film medium? Where did this perspective come from?

**TMQ:** Before we started to shoot, I was searching for footage about the Vietnam War, and accidentally I discovered this footage from the American troops. It interested me that it was the same people who were displaced in the Quảng Ngãi province, which is also the hometown of Hồ Văn Lang after he was found in the forest. When I saw that people in the same location almost 50 years ago had to move because of the war, I needed to find a way to make that connection. But the other connection is filmmaking itself because in the archive footage you can see very obviously the filmmakers – the soldiers. They're using the clapper to mark the date and the shot; exactly like I'm doing in the same location.

**Endnotes**

- [1] "Rethinking a Nature/Culture Divide: A Public Lecture by Professor Philippe Descola" took place on November 10<sup>th</sup>, 2017. The event was co-organized by the Collège de France, the Faculty of Political Science of Chulalongkorn University, the Siamese Association of Sociologists and Anthropologists, (SASA), and the French Embassy of Thailand. "Tomás Saraceno: Arachnid Orchestra. Jam Sessions" was an exhibition at the NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore. It opened from October 23<sup>rd</sup> to December 20<sup>th</sup>, 2015.
- [2] Although many projects exploring the Anthropocene in Southeast Asian contemporary art context have taken place recently, I should mention one of the projects which was ahead of its time. Published in 2006 and edited by Lucy Davis, *Regional Animalities: FOCAS Forum on Contemporary Art & Society Vol 6* explored the relationship between the more-than-human worlds and contemporary art in Southeast Asia. The magazine was jointly-published by the Substation and Documenta # 12 magazines project.
- [3] This interview is a part of my research project titled Southeast Asian Cinema and the Anthropocene. The research is supported by the British Academy's Visiting Fellowships Programme under the UK Government's Rutherford Fund. I want to extend my gratitude to my host institution, the Centre for Research and Education in Arts and Media (CREAM) at the University of Westminster.
- [4] Bennett, J. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.
- [5] A fungus in agarwood is rare. An oil produced by the fungus that grows in the agar tree has been used as incense in Southeast Asian region for centuries but is also in demand from top perfume houses. Because the agarwood is critically endangered, this fact makes it highly expensive and irresistible for people to smuggle it out of the forest.
- [6] Kohn, E. *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013.
- [7] Chakrabarty, D. "The Climate of History: Four Theses", *Critical Inquiry*, 35:2, 197–222.
- [8] Although Trương positioned himself as a victim of the climate crisis, I want to point out that as an artist he is an *active* victim, not a passive one.
- [9] Animism as non-horror is a quality that can be found in a group of Southeast Asian art films. For example, the films by Apichatpong Weerasethakul (*Tropical Malady*; *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*) and Phuttiphong Aroonpheng (*Manta Ray*).

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# Stories of animistic cinema

May Adadol Ingawanij's text, written in the mode of creative non-fiction, is based on her curation of the project Animistic Apparatus. As part of the project, Ingawanij and co-curators organised a field learning, artistic research and performance rehearsal event in Udon Thani, northeast Thailand, involving 40 artists, curators, anthropologists and researchers largely based in Southeast Asia, and an itinerant film projection troupe.

text by **May Adadol Ingawanij**

## What is cinema?

Dan-arun Saengthong's novella *Maew Phi* [Ghost Cats] tells a story of existing in a cinematic world. The narrator addresses his tale to "*phor naak praphaan chom ake* [Mr Most Handsome Writer]" and counsels his addressee, the handsome writer, to read his tale out loud.<sup>1</sup> He notices that his would-be-listener has come to him bearing a neatly framed old Thai movie poster. "What?" Says the narrator. "You'll give me the poster if I tell you a ghost story?" He agrees to tell his tale with the caveat that even if his performance does not manage to scare his most handsome listener he would get the framed poster anyway.<sup>2</sup> *Maew Phi* is a ghost story of sorts, a fable of cinema as ecology.

Dan-arun queers the vowel system of the official Thai language to create a written tale which, when uttered out loud, better approximates the lyrical tone of speech native to a province situated in the northwest of Bangkok. The tale is made from alphabets but demands a listener rather than a reader. It recounts a cosmological journey the narrator had made in his youth, back when itinerant projectionists would turn up to the still rural parts of the province to show movies featuring Thai stars of the Cold War decades as part of nocturnal rituals and festivities accompanying the funerals and ordinations of members of powerful local clans. *Maew Phi* is a tale set in the past, back in the days when low-budget Thai movies were made on 16mm with live versioned sounds. Yet the strong desirability of the framed movie poster, the condition of possibility of the telling of the tale, creates an untimely ambience. The offering of this transactional object makes the past strangely present and the story an entanglement of times.

That evening, the narrator says, he had made the pilgrimage from his hut to the local temple to catch the all-night movies projection, taking place outdoors on its ground as part of a funeral ritual.<sup>3</sup> From his hut, it took around five hours to reach the site, the route taking him through a forest renowned among locals for its potency. Large trees grew thick and tall in it. There had once been a Buddhist temple there, which has now been left in ruins. One time, the narrator says, a wandering monk had appeared in the village and had spent a season meditating in that forest. Upon leaving he had told the villagers that the forest, though quiet, was not a suitable place for meditation.<sup>4</sup> The narrator spent most of the night in front of the movie screen. At around 2am, as the last film in the programme began, he set off in the depth of night for the long journey home. Some hours later he found himself back at the edge of the forest, on a path leading to a clearing concealed inside this territory. He wondered to himself why the forest was so deadly silent that night; unusually, there were no bird calls, not even cicada songs. Then, suddenly, he heard the sound of cats. The narrator says he glanced at the clearing up ahead, and what he saw made him freeze.

There were close to a hundred black cats, young and old, big and small, he says.<sup>5</sup> They formed a loose circle around the inert body of a large black cat. The waves

of sound he could hear were coming from that circle of black fur surrounding the dead body, the crying, and wailing of cats. The narrator says he tried to creep away as discreetly as he could but he snapped a dried twig with his first tentative step. The grieving cats lifted their heads, pricked their ears in a concerted movement, and directed their beaming yellow-green eyes in his direction. Then, says the narrator, he heard a small black cat uttering in the unmistakable miaowing of its species yet with words intelligible to his human ears. "Some-bo-dy-is-here-Grandpa-Chode".<sup>6</sup> The little black cat miaowed the narrator's name. "It's-Thid-Kode-from-Maap-Saan-Tawa-village!" Upon hearing his name the narrator says he dashed for his life. He could sense the beaming of eyes closing in on him. He reached the other end of the forest. As he crossed the invisible threshold out of the territory he noticed that the cats had stopped running. Instead, they lined up along the edge of the forest and called out to him in unison. In waves of sound, one after the other, they instructed him. "Thid-Kode-tell-Si-Nil-that-grandpa-Jaeng-is-dead".<sup>7</sup> Sri Nil is the name of his black cat back at the hut.

What if we take Dan-arun's *Maew Phi* to be a telling of the tale of what cinema is? In film and media theory, asking questions about medium ontology has entailed mobilising myths and motifs from Christian and Greek philosophies, and from images emblematic of the early twentieth-century modernity of the urban west. The shroud, the cave, the spectators fleeing the screen at the sight of the onrushing train, or the messenger gods Iris and Hermes, have become established fables with which to think through questions of medium configuration, disposition, and capacity.<sup>8</sup> What if we now add the fable of *Maew Phi* to this list? We would then be thinking about what cinema is with the objects, elements, figures, and beings that Dan-arun has gathered, and with the web of spaces and times that his tale has spun.

There is the outdoors, the immensity of darkness, the long night. There is a multiplicity of time-space in an expanded sense. In this fable, the temporal experience of the movies is not solely down to the spectator's experience of time travelling in front of the screen, but the time of making the journey on foot, a kind of nocturnal pilgrimage, to and from the screen. The pilgrimage produces an expanded topography of cinematic space, not just the spaces visualised in each movie, not the space in front of and around the screen, but an entanglement and superimposition of territories. The temple is the site of prayers, festivities, and commercial transactions. The forest is the territory of a Buddhist temple, the territory of an opaque and potent spirit, or several of them, and the territory of an assembly of cats. Are the cats an assembly of the felis catus species or are they not exactly that kind of being? Are they ghosts or not exactly ghosts? The nocturnal event is a funeral ritual and a festive performance. The performance is a show that is somewhere between a movie projection show and a live sound show.

Using this fable of the encounter between the movie pilgrim, the sort-of-ghost-cats, and the sort-of-open-air-movies as a story to think with, we might then ask whether cinema is a projection of moving images on the screen or an ecology of relations sustained and changed with sound and image, a ritual of communicative exchange among beings entangled in multiple worlds. Is the movie show addressed to human spectators, to the departed, or to the undead presence of spirits and other spectral beings? Is the human attendant of the movie ritual a spectator, distracted or otherwise, or a part of the apparatus of projection and human-nonhuman communication?

## Who needs cinema?

Telling this fable of animistic cinema takes me away from those beloved myths of cinema's modern cities, New York, Paris, Berlin, Mumbai, Tokyo, and further into a world where the spectator becomes a re-wilded figure and an idea yet to be formulated. Who or what is the spectator that needs cinema? Not the mass, the moderns, the modern women, the prosumers. Telling this fable takes me to Udon Thani.

A regional centre in the northeast of Thailand near the border with Laos, Udon Thani was a key strategic location for the USA during the Cold War. It was in

this province that the neo-imperialist had one of its main army bases for conducting bombing campaigns against communist targets in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, and where it operated a large radio intelligence-gathering station. At the beginning of this century, during the War on Terror, investigative reports suggest that the province held a black site used for torturing a man believed to be one of Osama Bin Laden's top lieutenants.<sup>9</sup> In the centuries prior to the early modern expansion of Siamese rulers into the northeast, Udon Thani formed part of the Lao Lan Xang kingdom, a competitor of the Ayutthaya kingdom in the central region of what is now Thailand. During the past decade of Thailand's regression to military authoritarianism and juridical impunity, Udon Thani came to be regarded as the heartland of the Red Shirt masses. The province is currently attracting speculative interest as an urban centre in a region earmarked for the high-speed rail megaproject forming part of China's infrastructural politics of global domination.

Udon Thani's strategic significance during the Cold War had the contingent effect of integrating the province into the war-fueled infrastructure of transnational media and entertainment. Between the mid-1960s to the US defeat in the Vietnam War, the GI population at the army base stimulated the fast flow of audio-visual and camera equipment into the province. These were imported as tax-free recreational goods for the base and then illicitly sold onto the province's monied inhabitants. In the recollection of a native Udon Thani urbanite of the Cold War generation, it was via this black market for entertainment and luxury goods that he started his life-long collection of film equipment and records. And it was via the influx of the latest films, stimulated by the war-driven acceleration of the local entertainment and service economy, that he styled his cinephilic young self after the look of movie stars.<sup>10</sup> The portable film projection tools that arrived via this war-driven media infrastructure were used by US and Thai ideologues to propagate the Free World myth in the region's rural areas.<sup>11</sup> The influx of these tools facilitated the sojourn of itinerant film projectionists to the northeast and the borderland connecting Thailand and Laos, enabled by the US funded project of highway construction to create a transportations network linking the army bases in the region and the region to Bangkok.

What storytellers they are in Udon Thani! The men in their sixties and seventies whose houses have a shelf, a corner, a room, a floor, lined with stacks of celluloid cans and carrying cases that have been gathering dust over the decades. Several lives ago in their youths, they had toured the towns and villages as workers and members of itinerant film projection troupes. One of them lays claim to ownership of the tale of *phi jang nang* [ghost commissioned movie projection].

Kham Chanode is a Taraw palm forest situated on a small reservoir island in a district around eighty kilometres from downtown Udon Thani. The Thai word for this type of tall thornless palm tree is *chanode*. The reason the island is named after it is because the population of Taraw palm trees on the island is among the most concentrated in the country. Thongchai Saengchai, the owner of a successful itinerant film projection service in Udon Thani called Jaemjaan Phapphayon, is the storyteller who claims authentic and authorial ownership of this tale.<sup>12</sup> According to him, it was his workers who had once unwittingly projected movies for an assembly of ghosts. As he tells it, the incident took place on the night of 29 January 1989. In December the previous year, a man had visited his office to book one of his projection units for an event the following month, putting down a deposit of 500 baht. They were to go to the village of Wang Thong near the Taraw forest during the annual festival known as *jaek khao* [disseminating rice], during which humans carry out rituals to transmit merit and auspicious energies to wandering spirits. On the day, Thongchai says he dispatched his projection truck with a troupe of seven men. It was winter. By the time his men had arrived in the area around five o'clock in the afternoon, the sun was already setting. As the men approached the village a figure greeted them and guided them onto a site three kilometres beyond the settlement area. Thongchai says his workers told him they did not think anything of it and proceeded to set up the screen



**Korakrit Arunanondchai and Alex Gvojic (with boychild)**

*No history in a room filled with people with funny names 5*. Installation view Carlos/Ishikawa, London, 2018. Image by May Adadol @ Korakrit Arunanondchai and Alex Gvojic (with boychild)

and other projection tools. As they were doing so the men began to feel that the site was strangely devoid of people. Unusually, no food vendors appeared to set up their carts and stalls in preparation for that evening's trade with the moviegoers. His workers began projecting the first movie from eight o'clock, at which point the space around the screen appeared to be filled with seemingly human figures. The women were dressed in white and sat to one side, while the men were dressed in black and sat to the other side. The figures sat very still.

At four in the morning, in Thongchai's tale, a figure came up to his men to tell them to end the show rather than continue to sunrise as was the convention. The figure gave the workers the remaining payment of 3,500 baht. At this point, Thongchai says, the projectionist told him that he turned off the machine, looked around, and saw that the spectator figures had all disappeared. The men packed up and left the area at dawn. They stopped to purchase cigarettes at the village. At the store, some villagers asked where they had been the previous night. The villagers said that people in the village could hear the distant sound of movies being projected. Their young

men had ridden motorbikes following the direction of the sound but none could find the projection site. Thongchai says that when his workers told the villagers that they were taken to a spot three kilometres away the villagers exclaimed that this could not have been possible. On that site stood Kham Chanode forest, potent, inaccessible, and filled with spirits. Thongchai says his workers sped back to the city, rattled, and told him that they could no longer work for him for fear of further spectral encounters.

In Thongchai's telling, he himself remained incredulous. It was not until the tale of his ex-workers' experience acquired media profile, and began to morph into another version through media embellishment, that he decided to visit the island of Kham Chanode himself. He says that the media had turned his workers' encounter with *phi jang nang* into an inauthentic story of a lottery miracle. According to the media, the villagers who had spoken to his men that morning had noted down the number plate of the projection lorry and then had purchased a lottery ticket with a numerical correlation, resulting in a big win. At this point in Thongchai's tale, he visited the abbot of a Buddhist temple situated by an unstable wooden bridge leading to the palm forest on the island. He asked the abbot to tell him about the forest and its powers, at which point, he says, a snake appeared and coiled itself in front of the abbot. This, according to the abbot, was a warning for him not to transmit what he knows. Thongchai says he then left the temple and walked across the bridge into the territory, where he saw a fantastical sight of hundreds of multicoloured fish and albino eels in a square-shaped pond. Of the frail old bridge, he says it was not remotely possible that it could have carried the projection truck's weight. In his telling, he then addressed his prayer to the potent presence in that forest territory, asking for a manifestation to confirm if it was indeed true that his men had projected movies for an assembly of ghosts. Thongchai says that it was at that point that he and his wife caught a fleeting sight on the damp earth, a trace of the tire tracks made by the projection truck's wheels leading into the forest.

To further his investigation he approached an esteemed monk in the region, renowned for having the power to communicate with a Nāga [mythical serpent] called Phraya Srisudtho. Thongchai says it was the monk who told him that the Taraw forest on that island is a potent territory because it is the threshold where the Nāga prince passes between his underworld kingdom and the earthly world. The Nāga is a deity that alternates between mythical serpent form and human form. The monk told him that the Nāga had borrowed the physical form of the man who had initially appeared at Thongchai's office to book his projection service. The mesmeric fame of his itinerant movie service was such that its reputation had radiated into the Nāga's realm. In this tale, the Nāga Phraya Srisudtho had desired the troupe to perform during the new year festivities in his underworld kingdom. And it was this mythical being that had hypnotised Thongchai's workers and transported them into Kham Chanode.

The sense of the Taraw island as a potent territory is strongly intertwined with media amplification. Thongchai himself skilfully feeds the fable of *phi jang nang* by continuing to organise regular rituals at the site's designated worship area, mastering a performative idiom amenable to mediatisation and amplification. Recently reported in the news was his performing an offering to the serpent prince, apparently in return for having won a seven-figure sum at the lottery.<sup>13</sup> Within another realm of the performative, the artist Korakrit Arunanondchai draws inspiration from this same fable while turning the serpent prince into a trans figure.<sup>14</sup> His collaborative video installation and performance *No history in a room filled with people with funny names 5*<sup>15</sup> associates the body and dance gestures of boychild with the Nāga, and imagines the sight of those spectral bodies dressed in white gathering and dispersing around the screen. The high audience ratings for a recent mythological drama series whose protagonist is a female mythical serpent has had the effect of transforming Kham Chanode into a major pilgrimage site. This has been a windfall for Jaemjaan Phapphayon. The projection service now has a permanent pitch in the designated worship area to project movies sponsored by the pilgrims, or the hosts. In other words, those wishful humans who pledge a specific number of movies to be projected as a votive offering to the Nāga in return for granting their wish.

### Cave boys and nang kae bon

*Nang kae bon* refers to a practice of outdoor movie projection for ritual purpose, whereby the human initiator of the ritual, that is the host, commissions a projection event as a votive offering addressed to powerful spirits. The spirits whom the host ritualistically addresses are usually associated with a territorial radius. Territory in this sense, we might say following Ang Chulean's work on the animistic cosmology of the Khmer divinity figure the Neak Ta, is a force field associated with an ancestral and cadastral figure of divinity. The Neak Ta is not a "simple spirit". And we might also add that it is not a simple spatial symbol of ancestral ownership of the land. The Neak Ta is "[an] energy force relating to a specific group such as a village community." Ang explains this point with an infrastructural metaphor. "It is the main point of energy in the network linking the whole village, just like, for example, the circuit box is the junction of the electric wires serving a group of buildings or an area". Unlike ether,<sup>16</sup> when theorised as a concept of medium due to its ubiquity, permeability, and invisibility, the spirit, as a mediating *and* territorialising force, is place specific. Territories associated with the mediating energy force of this or that spirit of place can vary in scale, from the microcosmic, approximating a settlement, or a village, or an overlapping of spirit territory with the boundary of regional or national political authority.

In Richard MacDonald's ethnographic study of film projection as ritual action in present-day Thailand, the projectionist troupe emerges as a crucial agent and apparatus of the ritual.<sup>17</sup> The host is the troupe's client and the one who occasions the ritual. In this sense the host can be thought of as the enunciating subject in an animistic communicative praxis, the precarious, vulnerable, and wishful human being who addresses spirit powers through ritual performance. Animistic cinema, as a concept, is attentive to enunciation in this sense. Within this communicative repertoire the role of the projectionist troupe is to implement, for the client, the procedure of enunciation addressing the spirits. The efficacy of the ritual, and the care with which it is implemented, is exacted via the metric of the number of films projected. The choice of film titles or genres is less critical than the duration of projection offered in this votive transaction. The projectionist troupe, functioning as the ritual's apparatus, implements the projection of a defined number of films as specified by the host, taking place at a certain site starting from a certain time as specified by that host, in return for an agreed fee. The host or the client does not necessarily need to be present during the ritual event. Often, he or she would leave it to the projectionist to select the choice of film titles making up the specified number of films offered in return for the favour or fulfilment granted by the spirit.

The bigger the pledge or plea to powerful spirits, the more critical the outcome at stake, the larger the quantity and scale of the votive offering. In 2018 a strange incident in northern Thailand made round the clock global news. An improvised transnational operation took place to rescue the boys from the *moo paa* [Wild Boar] football team and their coach from their two-week entrapment inside a cave. Shortly after the success of that operation, several maximally spectacular *nang kae bon* events took place across the country. In Rachburi province, situated in the southwest of Bangkok, a newspaper reported that a group of itinerant projectionists had organised an extravaganza whereby movies were simultaneously projected on the twenty-six screens installed outdoors around the ground of a temple. Local news says that the event was to fulfil a pledge that this group of projectionists had made to the temple's locally renowned Buddha statue, asking this figure of cosmological potency and institutional religious authority combined to help deliver the youths to safety in return for a night of votive binge projection.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, in Surin province in the northeast, a news channel reported that an association of itinerant projection troupes had organised an evening performance showing movies on nine different screens. This too was in fulfilment of a pledge that the association had made, according to one of the organisers, "to the spirits presiding over the entirety of our national homeland," in return for asking them to transmit maximally potent power to protect and rescue the boys.



Thanawat Phappayon itinerant projectionist troupe setting up in Baan Chiang, Udon Thani, April 2019.  
Image by Thanatchai Bandasak.

### Spirit of place

In April 2019, I organised a field trip in Udon Thani with curators Julian Ross and Mary Pansanga, and with Noir Row Art Space, one of the first contemporary art initiatives in the province. The trip was part of my Animistic Apparatus curatorial and publication project, which experiments with connecting contemporary moving image and media art with a ritualistic genealogy of art history routed through Southeast Asia.<sup>19</sup> We announced a call for participation for the five-day trip targeting Southeast Asian arts practitioners and researchers and gathered around forty participants for the adventure. We were a group of moving image, sound, media and performance artists, musicians, sculptors, curators, film programmers, academics, writers, and journalists. The plan was that we would travel to Udon Thani to meet the projectionist troupe Thanawat Phappayon, owned by Kasem Khamnak, a talented itinerant projectionist, electrician, and restorer of old projection and audio equipment whom MacDonald and I had previously met and interviewed for our earlier publications.<sup>20</sup> We would engage the troupe for three nights, not to project movies as such but to set up its apparatus at outdoor sites in the province where we could secure permission for use. The troupe would teach our group how to project moving image and audio-visual works using Thanawat Phappayon's unique assemblage of large scale tools, its steampunk combination of digital and analogue era equipment accumulated, repaired, and calibrated over the years to project outdoor films around the northeastern region

for ritual and small scale entrepreneurial purposes. We would ask Kasem and his small team to give technical help and advice as we organised ourselves into small groups to develop improvised cinematic performances drawing inspiration from the troupe's technical assemblage, and responding whatever contingency arising from our few nights of encountering found sites and enacting something that resonated with but was not quite *nang kae bon* or *nang klang plaeng* [open air movie projection].

While scouting for sites we were drawn to a secluded plot of land a short drive from the city centre, whose ownership was demarcated by an east-facing wooden spirit shrine announcing this place as the territory of 'grandfather spirit' Jao Pu Nong Jok. The modest shrine stood at the edge of a dried up pond, and behind it was a simple concrete pavilion. Across the other side of the pond was a funeral pyre discreetly concealed by rows of young trees. Grandfather Spirit, or Jao Pu, claims no renown beyond his locality. Yet judging from the volume of animal figurines - hundreds of cockerels, horses, zebras, and elephants of wildly varying sizes - and the candles, joss sticks, water bottles, and remnants of meat food items used for ritual communication strewn around his shrine, including a pig's head that we spotted during one visit, it was clear that the spirit attracted a regular stream of wishful ritual hosts. The first afternoon that I visited the site with my fellow curators, as we turned right from the main road onto a gravel lane leading to the shrine we noticed that a handmade poster had been placed under the sign by the turn-off indicating the location of the shrine. The poster reproduced low res images from four recently released horror and action movies, below which was scrawled the announcement that they would be projected at the shrine that night. As we drove up to the pavilion we saw that a group of middle-aged women were sweeping around the shrine. They were teachers at the local polytechnic college, they said, and they were cleaning up in preparation for a votive dance performance that they had pledged to Jao Pu. This was in return for his help in securing an excellent year of student recruitment for the college. The site was surely ideal for our experimentation.

I felt my own creeping nervousness shadowing the idea of asking for permission to set up an animistic projection apparatus on this site. What if this spirit of place deemed our activities as *phid thi phid thang* [wrong place wrong way], or as *phid phi* [wrongful to spirit]? How would we respond were there to be a manifestation during our nocturnal cinematic activities?

To use this territory we would need to seek Grandfather Spirit's permission via his intermediary, an elderly local man who goes by the appellation of *jaam*. This word indicates someone who undertakes the role of the master of ceremony in ritual acts addressing spirits, as well as someone who functions as an intermediary in acts of communication between humans and spirits. *Jaam* is not exactly a medium in the sense of someone through whom spirits speak through possession. The role of this intermediary is to witness an address, a pledge, or an offering being made to the spirit, and to function as the mediator relaying messages between humans and the spirit without going into a trance - a messenger in the literal sense. One morning during the field trip we went in our big coach to pay *jaam* a visit to the shrine. We gathered round him, seated on his stone bench by the front wall of the pavilion upon which his name and mobile number were painted in neat large letters, and we asked *jaam* to tell us stories about the spirit whom he serves as the messenger.<sup>21</sup> In *jaam's* tale Grandfather Spirit had been a soldier who had travelled from neighbouring Vientiane in Laos to this Udon Thani locality to learn the art of sorcery. The shrine has been there for as long as this intermediary can remember. According to him, the land on which the shrine stands, though now in the legal possession of the owner of an auto-rickshaw company in Udon Thani, is the ancestral territory of Jao Pu and by implication an emplacement of his network of 'descendants' in the neighbourhood. His tales of the spirit's potency flow freely from cases of women who come to the shrine to ask for a handsomely profitable night of paid sex with western men to instances of injuries and deaths befalling those who have disregarded the spirit's injunction, lied to him, or failed to fulfil a pledge they had made to him. In one of *jaam's* tales, the previous legal owner of the land and their



Jao Pu Nong Jok shrine movie projection announcement. Image by May Adadol

family members were punished with death, having ignored the order of Jao Pu not to mortgage the land. That punishment resulted in the land's repossession by the bank, which subsequently sold it off to the current legal owner. We were curious about the state of relations between the legal owner and the spirit master of this territorial force field. *Jaam* told us about the current deadlock. The business owner wants to turn the land into a rickshaw vehicle storage site. The spirit is requesting that the land be parcelled so that the area surrounding the shrine continues to belong to him, while the legal owner gets the share stretching to the road. The businessman has neither conceded to Jao Pu's request nor made a start on the building work.

That morning *jaam* fed us a tale of the spirit's potency implicating votive projection. According to him, Jao Pu is fond of offerings involving a northeastern type of popular music called *morlam*. But as a truth-loving spirit he does not much like the movies and would only very occasionally make the exception of accepting a movie projection offering. Once, according to the intermediary, there had been a host who had pledged three movies to Grandfather Spirit in return for winning the lottery with a three-figure sequence of numbers. The person did indeed win the lottery and therefore commissioned three movies to be projected at the shrine. *Jaam* told us that not long after the start of the first movie, before the first celluloid reel had reached its end, he said, the screen had

caught fire. Jao Pu then possessed a viewer in front of the screen, announcing through that person that he did not approve of the lie being propagated by the movie's creation of a fictional world, in which the actors only pretend to be killing each other. Hearing this twist in the tale, two quick thinking members of our group, the film critic and author Wiwat Lertwiwatwongsa and the moving image artist Nguyễn Trinh Thi, playfully asked the intermediary whether Grandfather Spirit might accept the offering of documentary films instead. His messenger did not rule out the option but gave no more than a bland recommendation of protocol. Whoever wants to try projecting documentary films for Jao Pu, he said, would first need to secure the spirit's permission or risk his punishment.

I confess to feeling a little relieved when Kasem's projectionist troupe ruled out the prospect of using the site of Jao Pu shrine. To give everyone in our big group a chance to experiment with the projection apparatus, they would need to be able to set up two large screens and audio systems on the site rather than the usual single screen set up. The area around the shrine did not have enough electricity to scale up to two screens.

### Apparatus of animistic cinema

To take part in or to function as a part of the apparatus of ritualistic addressing of spirits is to be entangled in an animistic ecology of communication. To define the communicative praxis of animistic cinema this way is to differentiate the dynamic at play from the question of the suspension of disbelief in the face of an uncanny manifestation, in other words, from the conceptualisation of the fantastic and its attendant issue of the relationship between visualisation and knowing. The emphasis here concerns human-spirit sociality, an assemblage of process, apparatus, and participatory action, rather than witness and belief.<sup>22</sup> This is the sense in which our group, and itinerant projectionist troupes such as Kasem's, could be part of the apparatus and medium of animistic cinema while able to suspend or withhold the question of personal beliefs. Unlike institutionalised religion it is not necessary to be a believer in order to take part. Members of the projection troupe can provide the service of installing and facilitating ritualistic movie projection without needing to believe in the presence of this or that spirit, emplacing this or that territory, who permit the ritual of projecting movies addressed to them.

The projection apparatus that we encountered comprises the following elements: a scaffolding system for constructing the large scale frame to hang the screen, which can expand to 12m wide, and a smaller unit for installing an 8m wide screen; white screens made from plastic combined material with dark fabric edges bearing the name and contact detail of the troupe; a triple-stacked digital projector set for the largest screen and a double-stacked set for the smaller one; two sound systems; electricity cables, extension cords and connectors; multi coloured flashing lights enframing the large screen, which is switched on prior to the start of or during the interval between movies, coordinating with very loud *morlam* and other popular music played from the sound system; a row of Thai national flags placed at the top edge of the scaffolding holding up the 12m screen. A description of the projection apparatus of Thanawat Phappayon would have to extend to the large truck whose back compartment has been adapted to house the sound console and the cabinets containing the stacked projector sets. The truck effectively functions as the audio-visual controls centre, and the moveable base from which the projector system can be adjusted for correct height and distance relative to the screen. This truck, and a small open backed van, double up as sleeping compartments for the technicians in the troupe since most jobs involve overnight stays on site. The screen size and the scale of the scaffolding units are tools dating back to the analogue era. Kasem's self-assembled stacked projector sets, whose method of construction he picked up from watching youtube videos he says, prolong the useful life of this older generation of tools by amplifying the illumination capacity in a low cost way. Rather than having to fork out a large sum of money on an industrial scale digital projector with sufficiently high lumens, the stacked sets use two or three budget projectors aligned and calibrated to project the same image, exactly superimposed, providing adequate definition, scale, and brightness



Inside the projection truck, Baan Nong Na Kham temple. Image by Noir Row Art Space

for the large screens. The audio setting is designed to maximise the heavy pulse and bass dominated register of hybrid *morlam* techno music, currently the popular industrial, sonic form in northeast Thailand and beyond.

The projection apparatus that Thanawat Phappayon uses is mobile in several senses of the word. Its modular parts can be disassembled and transported on the truck. They can be assembled to project movies, or the same scaffolding parts can be turned into a concert stage and the multi-coloured flashing lights and bass-heavy sound system installed for *morlam zing* concerts. This is a form of live entertainment combining the hypnotic style of *morlam* singing with techno and hip hop beats and the spectacle of scantily clad female dancers performing set pieces on stage. According to Kasem, and also *jaam*, in their local areas of operation *morlam zing* is fast overtaking movie projection as the votive offering of choice.

#### Projection permitted, projection denied

The identity of the field trip's participants could be classified in various ways. Where we live, what we do, our nationality, ethnicity, and gender would be the obvious ones. During the trip another category became operative: those with the capacity to sense spectral presence and those whose sensorium is less attuned to an animistic ecology of communication. We were differentiated between those who more or less understand what might count as a manifestation or a sign of communication with potent beings, what sounds, scents, sights, or movement one might pause over and act in recognition

of, and those who have less competence to sense, know and do within animistic ecology.

We spent three nights on two different sites in Udon Thani. The activities on the first night took place on the grounds of a Buddhist temple, Wat Baan Nong Na Kham, situated in a small neighbourhood around twenty kilometres from downtown. Kasem had recommended this temple ground as he sometimes projects movies there for the neighbourhood audience, in order to make a bit of money outside the season of high demand for ritual projection events. We spent the other two nights in the small district of Baan Chiang around fifty kilometres from downtown. In 1992, UNESCO included Baan Chiang village on its world heritage list on the basis of its archaeological importance as one of the most significant sites of prehistoric settlement discovered in Southeast Asia, with evidence of the production of a distinctive style of ceramic pottery and bronze tools. The village boasts a relatively well-resourced museum (Baan Chiang National Museum), and a moderate level of tourism where visitors rent homestay rooms and bungalows.

Using the Buddhist temple ground as a site for modern and contemporary art, and for movie events, is following a well-trodden path. There was nothing particularly novel about our group turning up one afternoon with Kasem's team, who set about installing the two sets of projection systems side by side. The larger screen was being erected on the concrete pitch, and the truck carrying the three-stacked projector set stationed a short distance from the screen. The smaller screen went on the adjacent lawn. In the early 1990s, a historically significant temple in the northern city of Chiang Mai had hosted the activities of Chiang Mai Social Installation (CMSI), an artist-led intervention taking the form of an ephemeral series of self-organised festivals that is now being accorded art historical significance as one of the points of emergence of Southeast Asian contemporary art.<sup>23</sup>

Juxtaposing this art historical example with this model of animistic cinema calibrates the question of the promise and significance of the Buddhist temple ground as a site of artistic practice. The founding organisers of CMSI were drawn to the temple ground on the basis that this was the closest equivalent to public space in Thailand.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, approaching the temple ground as a materialisation of an ecological network constituted through human and nonhuman communication partially dissociates this type of site from the conceptual image of the commons. This shift in conceptual vantage point calibrates the notion of the accessibility of the temple ground with the question of spirit hospitality, and the degree of territorialising authority of ontologically differentiated entities. How the space can be used and who can enact certain actions or interactions in it becomes a question implicating more than human territorial authority.

As the site of the expenditure of hospitality and the force field of concentration and distribution of energy, the multivalent territoriality of the temple ground played out in several ways during the night we spent at Baan Nong Na Kham. As the main organiser of the session, I was mildly chastised by the village headman who knew of our arrival from the watchful neighbours of the temple. He was expecting the usual itinerant projectionist troupe to turn up, and not an international delegation, as he put it, and therefore had not ordered the formal procedure of hospitality to be prepared. He indicated that I had not properly done my part to maintain the repertoire of receiving community hospitality. I was told that the village welcomes all guests; and if the hosts had been informed in advance that there would be strangers from afar turning up, he used the elegant formal phrase *khaek baan khaek muang* [guests of the home, guests of the settlement], they would have prepared a proper welcoming by opening up the chapel to show us the community's prized Buddha statue. Further carrying out his duty as the lead host (layman, human) to remind our group of what was meant to be our properly assigned position in this ecology of place, he asked me to write a short script inviting the neighbourhood to drop by at the temple that night, which he would then announce over the village loudspeaker system. According to his instruction, the script should announce our schedule of entertainment for the evening, and, most importantly, signal to the local vendors to ride over with their drinks and snacks carts to make a bit of trade.

The adjacency of the crematory and the multi-purpose open space at Baan Nong Na Kham temple brought into play the adjacency of different beings and presence. Earlier in the evening, the artist Christian Tablazon had strayed over to the concrete pyre

to gather soot that had accumulated from previous cremation occasions. Later that night he stuck the soot, microscopic remnants of lives once lived, to a found strip of 35mm film, with the idea to enfold this creation from the site into one of his installation works in development. As he was solitarily gathering the soot in the fading evening light, the hour of *phi taak pha aom* [ghosts hanging nappies on the line], he told me afterwards that he wondered whether he was transgressing spirit hospitality. Later in the night some members of our group standing around the projection truck, and another group standing a little further away, smelt a strange passing scent. It was a rancid smell associated with decomposed matter and an airless environment, two of the people who experienced the sensation said afterwards. It was the same smell as that which she had fleetingly sensed at her grandmother's funeral ceremony, one of them told me. In the moment of sensing this odd smell, the group by the truck had joked that one of them must have stepped on a dog turd. After all, we were sharing the ground with the large group of dozy temple dogs. But somehow the smell was uncannily strong and enveloping.

The intensified sensation of the spectral scent coincided with strange precision with the moment in which a curator in the group was playing on one of the screens his footage recording a Thai classical music ensemble, which was performing a funeral piece during the ceremony for his deceased grandmother. Afterward, we wondered if the smell perceptible to some of us had indeed been a manifestation of the presence of the undead around the crematorium, those that may have been beckoned by the music intended to mark the occasion of the passing of one realm to another. Or was the smell a manifestation to us of the displeasure of the spirits of place for the careless manner with which we had turned up and occupied the temple ground for a night? We belatedly asked ourselves, did we conduct any kind of permission-seeking ritual before pitching up and trying out our performance ideas on this territory? Shouldn't we have done so? On subsequent nights at the Baan Chiang site, before starting our sessions Mary and I lit candles and joss sticks near the open space we were given permission to use to ask the spirits of place, whoever they were, for their permission and hospitality.

### **Our vulnerability**

The field trip took place in the last week of April, the latter part of the season of punishing heat and hot, dry wind. In this era of increasingly unpredictable weather, the summer season in the northeast is itself transitioning into days of an intense heatwave, the occasional nights of freak hailstones, and the threat of the unseasonably early arrival of rainstorms.

In Baan Chiang village we were given permission by the kindly head of the municipality to use the very large ground situated by the pond next to the museum. Noir Row Art Space founders, Panachai Chaijirarat and Punyisa Silparassamee, had suggested using this site in the village as it was not immediately surrounded by houses and at night would get dramatically dark. A few rows of very tall palm trees dotted the ground, which gave the site a spectrally atmospheric air, suggestive as they were of the Taraw palm of Kham Chanode island. The afternoon when we arrived in Baan Chiang in our coach and needed to get immediately to the site to work out with Kasem's troupe the specific spots where we would install the two-screen systems, the temperature outside our air-conditioned coach had climbed to a forbidding mid-forties celsius, and the strength of the sun was almost frightening. The rows of laburnum trees along the lane separating the large ground from the pond next to the museum were fully flowering, displaying their bright yellow cascading blooms marking the hottest time of the year. The strong sun had baked to dust the ground's compacted earth, whose high iron content gave it a red-brown tinge. At one corner of this large ground, a few fitness equipment that had seen better days were placed under a small pavilion for use during the neighbourhood's collective evening ritual of strolling and jogging along the lane looping around the pond. Small solar panels were attached to a few of the lamp posts. The official's only condition in permitting our using the ground was that we would need



Performance artist Red Slumber testing out an idea as the wind was picking up. Image by Sompot Chidgasornpongse

to pay for whatever electricity we used during the two nights.

In Baan Chiang we were vulnerable to the volatility and intensity of weather and the limited electricity supply. On our first night of experimentation, the nearby temple was hosting festivities celebrating the ordination of a local man. A full scale *morlam zing* concert was the highlight of the festivity, and our two projection systems jostled with the concert across the village for electricity supply. The night before we were due to turn up, Udon Thani had made national news because a hailstorm had swept through several districts including Baan Chiang. On our last night we were intending to begin our session at dusk, around six o'clock, hoping to synchronise our activities with the leisurely rhythm of the evening strollers. But towards the end of the afternoon, the weather dramatically changed. The sky abruptly darkened and the wind picked up fast, swirling clouds of earth particles and crisp dried leaves. The vendors of grilled meat, sweets, and cold drinks who had lined their carts along the pavement at the top end of the pond expertly packed their goods and swiftly folded their parasols. Kasem's technical team had already finished erecting the scaffolding for the 12m screen. The hanging speakers flanking the screen were in place, and the row of decorative Thai flags along the top of the scaffolding was fluttering wildly. They had attached the

rolled-up screen material along the top of the scaffolding but held off from unfurling it. While we worried about the prospect of heavy rain calling off the session, the technicians took precaution against the strength of the wind. Under the dark grey clouds Kasem casually brushed off my worry about the rainstorm. He couldn't yet smell the vapour of rain, he told me, and this in itself indicated that the rain was some way off, so there was a chance that the storm clouds threatening to burst might blow away from us in another direction. For the itinerant troupe disastrous weather is strong wind. So long as the stacked projectors and the audio controls system are protected from rainwater, and so long as the screen remains rolled up as the wind sweeps past, the possibility of being able to project movies that night remains in play. Even amid bad weather the scaffolding can be erected and left to stand in the rain, they taught us. What is guaranteed to bring the metal frame crashing down is the wind blowing directly into the taut surface of the screen, turning the unfurled material into a kind of sail that the ship's captain has lost control of. The wind was our biggest threat that evening, yet we were also reliant on its forcefulness of movement. Our only hope was for the wind to blow hard and long enough to carry the storm clouds right beyond the site.

Waiting out there in the open at dusk with no neighbourhood joggers in sight, entirely at the mercy of the wind, we thought we may as well try addressing the spirits of place. For this emergency, we delegated the task to the independent filmmaker Daniel Hui. The medic and film programmer Kridpuij Dhansandors counted up the candles and joss sticks that we had to spare from my earlier improvised permission seeking ritual, totting up the bundle according to his idea of an auspicious number enabling ritual communication. Before conducting his ritual of address by the tall palm trees, Daniel checked with us if his action should be Thai style or Chinese style. Not long afterward the wind died down and the rain clouds blew past. Darkness took over as the technical troupe unrolled the large screen material and stretched it over the scaffolding frame.

### Maximal enunciation

The artists Riar Rizaldi, lololol collective (Sheryl Cheung, Xia Lin), Taiki Sakpisit, and Arnont Nongyao have a strong shared experience in creating sound performances, moving image, media art, audio-visual live performances. After the first night of improvising together, Taiki recut his psychedelic film incorporating footage of Thai mythological movies from the early 1980s, *The Age of Anxiety* (2013), and offered this material for the next bout of collaboration. On the last night, this team transformed the nocturnal ground by the pond into a terrain of extremity of scale. Assigned the 12m screen and its surrounding space, on an intensely dark night with no moon, Riar and lololol collective stationed themselves up on the projection truck, taking over the audio control and connecting their laptop and contact microphone to the system to create further sonic disturbance. Next to the truck, Arnont set up another projector, adding his one to the three already in use on the truck, but intending his to function as a disruptive, roving light beam. The noise generated during their improvisation was immense. Taiki's recut video further intensifies the aggressiveness of the rapid montage, abstracting faces and body parts into excessively powerful stroboscopic flashes. The insistently pulsing flashes of light emanating from the very large screen bounced off the compacted reddish earth, creating another mirroring space on the ground. The roving beam thrown from Arnont's projector created yet another rhythmic punctuation. This fifteen minute or so of improvised performance created, and insistently expressed, an oceanic expansiveness of extreme images and sounds. Subjected to the maximalism of this performance our overwhelmed ears picked up another kind of noise, the rasping of four or five motorcycle engines. A procession of front lights emerged from the darkness. A group of young men in the village had ridden over to the site following the direction of the noise explosion.

In his blog contribution to the Animistic Apparatus project's archive, Riar explains his process of contributing to this improvised performance in the following way:

My sound performance is a collection of sound that was rendered and randomly composed through computational code processing. During the artistic lab, I was interested in this notion of scale and quantity in the practice of offerings for the spirit. Moreover, I was also intrigued by the idea of cinema that is conceived as an instrument for spiritual measurement. Therefore, for any of the improvised sound performances I did during this artistic lab, it was not the synchronisation between images and sounds that was important to me but the concept of scale and quantity in the collaboration between human and apparatus...For this performance, we pushed the limits and capabilities of our apparatus to the point that every output was rendered as an abstract form. The result was almost pure noise without any information. With the initiation to present this improvised piece not exclusively for human consumption but also for powerful nonhuman entities, will this offering of sensory experiences mediate the communication between humans and nonhumans?<sup>25</sup>

### Nocturne

As night fell the ground became very dark. Our sources of illumination were one or two sparsely lit lamp posts along the lane, the projector light beam from the two systems, the blip from the audio control console, and the light from our laptop screens dotted around the large site. To move around in the nocturnal void we had to rely on the torch beam from our mobile phones, giving just enough light to spot uneven mounds of earth, large fallen branches, twigs, field mice; to be able to see what we were doing while connecting this cable to that device, and to see the food on the plate when we ate our simple rice dishes on site. The performance artist Sim Hoi Ling spent two nights in that intense darkness patiently and determinedly connecting an array of wiring to small circuit pads to make a basic sensor monitor for her mysterious performance idea, assisted by a few technically literate members of the group, and surrounded by three or four more members directing their mobile torch beams to the circuit pads to provide assistance.

The two screens were installed at some distance apart and set at a slant to each other to evoke the cinemascope screen's curved contour. The intensity of darkness made it tempting to throw the beam from the additional projectors a few of us had brought, away from the white surfaces and onto that nocturnal void in between and surrounding the two screens. As the moving image and photographic artists Danaya Chulphutiphong, Pathompon Tesprateep, and Pam Virada were experimenting with another way of using Kasem's stacked system, projecting multiple superimposed images from each of the projector channels, Arnont tilted the beam of his roving projector to the darkness high above the top line of the screen. As he did so the silhouettes rustling loudly in the strong night wind transformed into illuminated palm fronds.

At the far end of the ground, there was a spot where the soil had been dug and left in large, uneven mounds. This was where Hoi Ling decided to place the sensor device, upon which are attached a white light and a yellow light. Placed in front of a small mirror, the sensor picked up the movement of insects around the device, which in the process activated the yellow light illuminating the soil. As the yellow light became activated the white light would turn off, affecting the movement of beings around it. Behind the sensor and lights, a small projector was projecting a video by artist Manassak Klongchainan directly onto the earth's surface. Hoi Ling's performance took place around this self-recursive system animated by insect movement. Wearing an oval mirror over her face, the artist improvised slow, angular, contorted movements between the mounds of earth, movements drawing on her *butoh*-influenced training. Every now and then, as this mirror-masked figure turned her face, the irregular radiation of the yellow and white lights would bounce off the reflective surface. Blindly, the figure entered the environment demarcated by the irregular movement of light. At times her eerily gliding body would function as the projecting surface for the images from Manassak's video, comprising footage of the massacre of socialists on the ground of Thammasat University in Bangkok in 1976.



Future Tao at Baan Nong Na Kham temple. Image by Noir Row Art Space

Future Tao is one of the projects in progress by lololol collective, whereby the duo would talk to people in different locales about their habit of using laptop and mobile devices. From this research, they translate people's bodily ticks into tai chi moves. At the temple ground lololol's Xia Lin stepped into the space demarcated by the large screen and projection truck. Dressed head to toe in black, she slowly walked a circular radius suggesting a territory, then began an elegantly flowing tai chi choreography. On the screen, appearing at regular intervals, was a succession of figures, dressed in black and white, enacting similar moves against a white background. This minimalism of colour juxtaposed incongruously with the multicolored decorative flashing lights surrounding all four sides of the screen. Superimposed onto this footage were horizontal monochrome strips descending slowly downward. Abstract, loud, scratchy noises enveloped the space of projection, created by lololol's Sheryl Cheung in collaboration with Riar. Sheryl was picking up the sonic ambience with her contact microphone, while Riar was using a computational process to create noise by following the movement of the bodies and the shapes on the screen. While Xia Lin's human body looked dwarfed in this projection space, her movement evoked the capacity of the body trained in martial arts to channel and receive energy linking inner being with cosmological force. For a fleeting moment, a motorbike entered this territory of intensified energy, its driver manoeuvring the vehicle to slowly encircle Xia Lin's flowing movement. An old temple dog, slowly crossing the ground, fleetingly became another element of the incidental performance.



A nocturnal offering, Pathompon's video projected onto Red's sculpture. Image Noir Row Art Space

On the last night in Baan Chiang we invited the traditionally trained *morlam* singer Patiwat Saraiyaem, and his accompanist on the bamboo *khaen* instrument, Buatongnoi Rosdet, to join the group. With its virtuosic combination of oral storytelling and poetry, and its hypnotic, repetitive rhythm, *morlam* is an inherently improvisatory performance tradition. Patiwat and Buatong made on the spot musical improvisation and vocal commentary accompanying the projection of videos by moving image artists Nguyễn Trinh Thi and Tanatchai Bandasak. The performers teamed up with the sound artist Zai Tang to make an audio-visual live performance of Tang's video *Escape Velocity II* (2018), a sound visualisation animation using recorded sounds of wildlife in Singapore as its starting point. Seated on a woven grass mat in between the double-stacked projector and the sound deck, Patiwat and Buatong improvised musical accompaniment and narration while abstract images of spiralling lines and twirling rings appeared on the screen. Stationed nearby behind the audio mix deck, as the duo was performing Tang suddenly realised that Kasem's sound technician had added an echo effects unit to the mixer. He started playing around with adding echoes, serendipitously, not understanding the northeastern Isaan language that Patiwat and Buatong were performing in, synchronising the sound effects with the duo's improvised response to his abstract animation as their narration began to grow into an intertextual tale referencing the Jakata, among other mythological stories, evoking cosmic time travel and the vertiginous sensation of being lost in time.

Fittingly, somehow, the very last improvisation that came together during our last

night of nocturnal experimentation was one that dispensed with the screens altogether. It was Pathomphon's inspired projection performance, throwing the light beam onto a found sculpture made from pink and green mosquito nets bought in the village earlier that afternoon by the artist and poet Red to try out a performance idea. We had asked Pathomphon to project his found-footage video comprising a montage of fleeting gestures and movements from old Thai films, showing abstracted bodies in the motion of departing, bodies disappearing behind a closing door, bodies wandering offscreen as if this were our offering to the spirits of this place just before packing up and taking leave of the site in the early hours. Undecided between the two screens, Pathomphon wandered around in the darkness and eventually caught sight of an uneven, diaphanous cuboid shape made from the nylon nets. In that extremity of darkness, accompanied now by the singing of the cicadas and the clanking in the distance as the men in the projectionist troupe began to disassemble the scaffolding, a succession of spectral bodies from an obsolete cinematic era appeared on the crinkled, see-through surface, silently gliding one after the other into the dense nocturnal expanse.<sup>26</sup>

### Endnotes

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earthly  
entanglements

# Talking in trees

*Vegetal references abound in Malay, an Austronesian language spoken by close to 300 million people living in Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, and Singapore. In this essay, I examine how Malay words have been shaped by plants, namely through analysis of a selected sample of 1) numeral classifiers, 2) concrete nouns, and 3) abstract nouns and other linguistic constructions for conceptual terms. Plants creep into the lexicon, as mimetic traces, compound words, and taxonomic elements. Through the examples chosen, I intend to illustrate the decomposition of the dualism between nature and culture in the Malay language*

text by **Alfian Sa'at**

The vegetal has a prominent presence in the Malay language. One of the tricky features of Malay grammar is the numeral classifier or *penjodoh bilangan*, where instead of saying “two houses” or “one house”, one uses the construction “number + classifier + noun”, such that one says *dua buah rumah* or *sebuah rumah*. This is similar to Mandarin, where in the phrase 一个人 (yí gè rén, or “one person”), 个 is the classifier.

That classifier, *buah* means ‘fruit’. It is used for things that are large, or of indefinite shapes (meaning not easily identifiable as flat, or long). So we get *sebuah kereta* (car), *sebuah meja* (table) and *sebuah negara* (country).

But aren't fruits by themselves small (compared to the house or car)? We get another classifier to relativise things, which is *biji* or “seed”. It is used for things that are small or round, so we get *sebiju cawan* (cup), *sebiju bola* (ball) and *sebiju telur* (egg). To complicate matters a bit, *biji* is also used for vegetables and fruits (instead of *buah*). So: *sebiju lobak* (carrot), *sebiju limau* (lime) and *sebiju durian*.

To say *sebiju durian* is to refer to the whole fruit. If one wants to refer to just the pulpy durian seed, then one uses the classifier *ulas*. This is a classifier for the contents of fruits that have compartments (locules) like the durian and jackfruit. In Malay, these locules are known as *pangsa*. Classifiers then are a matter of precision. How much durian did you eat? *Sebiju* will mean the whole fruit, *sepangsa* the contents of a locule, and *seulas* just a modest durian-seed.

The durian zooms in from *biji*, but the banana zooms out. *Sebiju pisang* is one banana, *sesikat* or *sisisir pisang* is a hand of bananas (usually 10-20 “fingers”; in Malay, *sikat* or *sisir* means “comb”), and *setandan pisang* is a bunch of bananas, which consists of tiers of hands of bananas. Casual speech in English will use “bunch of bananas” to mean “hand of bananas”, but this is not technically accurate.

Already in primary school, I had to learn the agriculturally specific difference between *biji*, *sikat/sisir* and *tandan*. The cheap thrills of pre-teens: giggling as we imagined filling in the blanks with “He ate a *\_tandan\_* of bananas after dinner”.

Back to *pangsa*: *rumah pangsa* refers to a block of flats. Because of this word association, I sometimes imagine an apartment block as a giant fruit with many pods. The vegetal haunts even this universal symbol of urban modernity.

Another classifier is *batang*, from “stem” or “trunk”. It is used for things that are long and straight. In ascending order of size we have: *sebatang pena* (pen), *sebatang lilin* (candle), *sebatang tongkat* (walking cane), *sebatang galah* (pole) and *sebatang sungai* (river).

Finally, there is *pucuk*, from “leaf shoot”. It is used for two categories of things: letters as well as things that have a tapering or pointed end—mostly weapons. So: *sepucuk jarum* (needle), *sepucuk surat* (letter), *sepucuk pistol* (gun) and *sepucuk senapang* (rifle). I used to wonder why letters—is it because in the past letters were rolled into scrolls, and therefore resembled an unfurled leaf shoot?

But I also think of the human body as a tree, and the arms are branches, and at the fingers are the leaf shoots that can grow into either letters or guns. Literacy or violence. As metaphor for human potential it is both romantic and clear-sighted.

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In Malay, many physical objects are named with plants as reference. From *batang*, which means “stem”, we get sticks and handles. Thus we have *batang joran* (fishing rod), *batang cangkul* (hoe handle), and *batang dayung* (oar handle).

Then there is *batang palsu*, a literal translation of the English “false stem” or pseudostem, where what appears like a trunk is actually composed of tightly packed overlapping leaves (like in the banana tree). Outside of such horticultural contexts, *batang palsu* is also used to refer to a dildo. Obviously, *batang* is also used as slang for male genitalia.

From *daun* or “leaf”, we get objects that are thin and flat. We have *daun terup* or *daun pakau* (playing cards), *daun kipas* (the wide part of a fan; often woven from mengkuang strips or a whole leaf of the palmyra palm), *daun tingkap* (window shutters) and *daun pintu* (door panel).

From *pucuk* or “leaf shoot”, we get things with tips and peaks. We have *pucuk api* (tip of a flame) and *pucuk ombak* (crest of a wave).

From *bunga* or “flower”, we get references to decorative patterns. One might say the *bunga* on a cloth is gorgeous, even if the design does not actually consist of printed flowers. Then there is *bunga tayar*, the tread pattern on tires. Grooves made on rubber sheets to make them dry faster are also referred to as *bunga*. Fireworks is *bunga api*, literally “flowers of fire”.

At a Malay wedding one might see the *bunga manggar*, a piece of decoration where sparkly coloured paper is twined around coconut frond ribs that radiate from the top of a pole. *Manggar* is the stem of the palm tree inflorescence (which are dreadlocks of tiny flowers), and the *bunga manggar* is made to resemble this lofty burst of colour.

Wedding guests might be presented with a *bunga telur* (*telur* is egg), which is a souvenir in the form of a hard-boiled egg. The packaging of this egg offers a creative challenge and becomes a craft project—sometimes it is dyed red, wrapped in a towel, encased in a box, nestled in a basket or dolled up in some configuration of pastel and glitter.

From *buah* or “fruit”, we get round or small objects, such as *buah baju* (buttons, *baju* is clothing), *buah guli* (marbles), *buah tasbih* (Muslim prayer beads), *buah catur* (chesspieces, *catur* is chess) and *buah dadu* (dice).

In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the nymph Daphne, in an attempt to flee from the amorous advances of the god Apollo, prays to her father, a river god, to open the earth or change her form. In a dramatic scene, she finds her hair turning to leaves, her arms to branches, and her feet to sluggish roots. I think of this scene as I recount all the ways the tree is mapped onto the human body—in Malay at least.

The bridge of the nose is *batang hidung* (nose stem). Between the nape and the head is *batang leher* (neck stem). The upper arm is ‘batang lengan’ (arm stem). The trachea is *batang tenggorok* (windpipe stem). Major veins like the vena cava are known as *pembuluh darah*. *Darah* is blood and *buluh* is bamboo.

The ear is divided into two parts. The *pohon telinga* (ear tree) is where it is attached to the head. The *daun telinga* (ear leaf) is the outer ear. Eyeballs are known as *biji mata* (eye seeds). The eyelid is the *kelopak mata*, sharing a word with *kelopak bunga* (flower petal).

And the body has both visible and hidden fruits. We will get the first one out of the way: the testicles are *buah pelir* (penis fruits). Flexed muscles also look like fruits, so the biceps are *buah lengan* (arm fruits) and the calf muscles *buah betis* (calf fruits). Breasts are *buah dada* (chest fruits), while kidneys are *buah pinggang* (waist fruits).

All these entanglements in the language, the dissolution of borders, between nature and the world of man-made objects, a relationship not between materials and products but models and copies, between origin and offspring. How would we treat this earth if we thought of selfhood as planthood?

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Plants lend themselves not only to the names of concrete objects in Malay, but also abstract concepts. *Bunga* (flower) is often shorthand for the beautiful. *Bunga bibir* is 'flowers from the lips' or sweet words, while *bunga lagu* is 'flowers of the song', or rhyming lyrics. *Berbunga-bunga* is elaborately flamboyant in speech and writing, a meaning it shares with the English word 'flowery'.

*Bunga*, however, can also mean 'sign' or 'omen' (a flowering tree is the sign that it will soon bear fruit.) One might reflect on an occurrence (like a break-up, a betrayal, war) by saying *dari mula sudah nampak bunganya*—'from the beginning one had already seen the flowers'.

In the traditional Malay martial arts form known as *silat*, movements are divided into *bunga silat* and *buah silat* (*buah* is fruit). The *bunga* are foundational movements demonstrated by the martial artist, often involving the slapping of parts of the body such as the shoulder or thigh. The *buah* are elaborations of these movements used in sparring and actual combat.

*Buah* is often used to mean 'result', 'outcome' or 'product', something it shares with the English, like in the terms *bear fruit* or *fruit* of one's labours. Thus we have *buah fikiran* (idea), the 'fruit of thought', *buah cakapan* (subject or topic), the 'fruit of speech' and *buah pena/kalam* (composition), the 'fruit of the pen'.

The *hati* (liver) is the organ of emotion in Malay culture, so the beloved is called *buah hati*. And *buah tangan*, the 'fruit of the hand', is what you bring as a gift when you visit someone, as it is considered impolite if you come empty-handed.

*Wang bunga* or *duit bunga* (*wang/duit* is money) is the term for 'interest' (in the monetary sense). This is probably related to the fact that the word for 'capital' in Malay is *pokok* or tree. That 'extra' appears as flowers on the tree. But interest or *riba* is forbidden in Islam, so those are seductive but poisonous flowers.

*Pucuk* (leaf shoot) is associated with beginnings. So one gets *pucuk cinta* (budding love) and *pucuk kemesraan* (budding affection). Then there is *mati pucuk* (dead leaf shoot), a reference to impotence. It is graphic and melancholy—a leaf bud unable to unfold into the full length of a leaf.

*Akar* (root) is associated with origins. Like in English, it can be used to refer to genealogical matters. For example, *Akar diri saya dari Jawa*—'My roots are from Java'. But to *berakar* or to 'have roots' can also mean to 'settle down'.

Some confusion arises over the use of *akar umbi* as the Malay term for the political grassroots. In English, 'grass roots' represent the ordinary members, as common and widespread as grass. But the grass has fibrous roots, whereas *akar umbi* actually refers to the primary root of a taproot system. In Malay, the ordinary members are conceived of as the core, or anchor, of the organisation.

*Pokok* (tree) is used to refer to what is most important and fundamental. In English, one would probably say 'basically' or 'essentially', but in Malay, one would say, *pokoknya* (the tree). *Pokoknya, kita harus berhati-hati.*—'Basically, we need to be careful.' Conversely, *ranting* (twig) refers to the trivial; *perkara ranting* means minor matters.

The word for cook and ripen is the same: *masak*. Which meaning came first? I would put my money on 'ripen'. In a *pantun* (poem) I learnt in Primary School, there is mention of bananas brought for a sea journey (*pisang emas bawa belayar*), and how

a single banana would cook on a chest (*masak sebiji di atas peti*). I had always thought the *pantun* nonsensical, because how could you cook a banana on a chest? Only much later did I realise that the meaning used in the poem was 'ripen'. But the episode signalled something to me about a largely urban childhood. There is a case to be made for the preservation of certain languages, because of their intimacy with the natural world. It might be odd to tell children to pay close attention to their Malay, so they may develop a deeper appreciation of plants. But faced with mass ecocide this connection seems more urgent than ever. *Pokoknya, pokok*. Essentially, the trees. The tree, the trees".

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*Kurik Kundi Merah Saga: Kumpulan Pantun Lisan Melayu* (Dewan Bahasa Dan Pustaka) 2013

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# This earth, this island Borneo

*Challenging the widespread view that globalization invariably signifies a “clash” of cultures, anthropologist Anna Tsing develops friction in its place as a metaphor for the diverse and conflicting social interactions that make up our contemporary world. In this excerpt from Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection (2005), Tsing shows how curious and creative cultural differences are in the grip of worldly encounter, and how much is overlooked in contemporary theories of the global.*

text by **Anna Tsing**

**K**nowledge grows through multiple layers of collaboration – as both empathy and betrayal. The process of layering is perhaps most striking in insignificant, vernacular collaborations – like the one I catalyzed in the village of Kalawan, at a moment when a much-cherished biodiversity was becoming an issue of anxious concern.

1994. It started with an innocent question about eels; I was thinking of dinner. “Are there any eels in the river?” I asked. Uma Adang, my Merantus Dayak friend, and mentor, leaned back, assuming her most serious oratorical bearing. “Facing the year 2000”, she proclaimed, “we must make a list of all the contents of this earth, this island Borneo”, Plants and animals, their names and uses, and local or foreign locations: all, she told me, should be listed. I was taken aback. I had not yet had the chance to explain much to her about my new research on global environmentalism. She was not in touch with global biodiversity experts, although surely some radio announcer or nature hiker had brought the rhetoric of environmentalism to her village. Yet she beautifully articulated the spirit of environmental prophecy: the looming, apocalyptic crisis of nature as revealed at the turn of the millenium, the chance to save the earth through proper naming, and the necessity, in doing so, of moving back and forth between “the island” and “the earth” – the minutely local and the whole globe.

Over the next ten days, Uma Adang sat with me and dictated over a thousand local life-forms. She wasn’t feeling well, and she didn’t want to go outside. Instead, she felt happier sitting with me on the floor of her home, telling me about plants and animals. Every now and again, someone else in the household, feeling the pleasure of our work, would come in with a plant sample picked outside: “You haven’t listed this yet”. We would add a new name to our list. [...] Uma Adang self-consciously limited herself to living things that were found in her local area, a karst-studded plain of small shifting fields and still-large but threatened forests at the foot of the Meratus Mountains. She excluded life-forms that she knew occurred at the coast, as that, she said, should be a different list. This was a self-conscious project of placing a local niche within a global imagining. The lists acknowledged and acclaimed global biodiversity by conserving a local space within it.

Because I had asked about eels, we began with *laba’ di ai’ing*, beings of the

water. Uma Adang listed the best fish to eat, and then some less significant fish, then the fish found in swamps, the reptiles, the amphibians, the mollusks, the crustaceans, and finally the water plants. Because I had watched people fish and admired their catch, the list easily evoked the everyday livelihood practices through which I, too, could call to mind these water creatures. Wading in deep river pools, young men threw hand-woven nets to catch the sweet-fleshed *iwak*. In the mountains, men bent bamboo poles, their ends craftily hooked underwater so that they sprung high over the river. When the *iwak* were big, people divided them up into small chunks, counting out equal shares for every household just as if they were game. In Uma Adang’s network, boys swam underwater with home-made goggles and rubberband-powered spear-guns to bring us delicious *kambalang* and *lampan*. Woven bamboo traps caught smaller creek fish in fast-running streams. In muddy creek holes, we could build a tiny dam and scoop up *saluwang* minnows with our hands; we steamed and ate them, bones and all. I once brought home a great *panting* catfish; it had been killed by a bird, which flew away when I ran up, leaving its fresh prey. As for turtles, frogs, shrimp, and snails: We had enjoyed them all. And, of course, eels.

The taste of food was not, however, the only pleasure called up in this list. Uma Adang is alert to the colors, textures, and sounds of the beings around her. She described the *karantung* frog as “the music of the deep water” and mimicked its call. She knows plants and animals in relation to locations: She tried to remind me of the place I had just seen the water plant *tantamau*, on the rocks where we were gathering snails. Sometimes forest birds and animals become companions: I saw my first *kuntan* tortoise when I was introduced to Uma Adang’s latest pet, whom she brought home from the forest to coax and protect and feed ripe bananas as it crawled around the house. As for riverside *lua’* trees, we talked as much about the animals attracted to the tree because of its fruit as about its human uses.

Meanwhile, the river was becoming a difficult place to find food. With the building of new roads, the practice of sending an electric current into the water with a car battery had been introduced to Uma Adang’s area. All the fish, big and small, died. (At least one person died too, by accidentally slipping into the water while the electric current was still active.) The rivers were becoming barren. Uma Adang’s worries about this situation provoked her attention to listing the river’s denizens. Her list was a form of apology that soon enough we would not be eating and even encountering these fish and frogs and eels. A prospective, incipient nostalgia helped motivate the list: the same incipient nostalgia as that which motivates so much of the science of environmental conservation, particularly concerning the conservation of biodiversity.

[...]

*My mother, the only Chinese American mother of an Ohio wildflower society, tells me: “Learning the names of plants is just like learning the names of people you meet; when you know their names, you can get to know them better”.*

The idea of biodiversity has proved charismatic because it combines the scientific legitimacy of biology with popular legacies of plant and animal identification. Victorian animal collectors, particularly in England and its diaspora, were fascinated by the variety of nature.<sup>1</sup> The theory of evolution interpolated species collecting into one of the most thrilling sciences of the times. Similarly, conservation biology energizes contemporary popular practices of nature appreciation in which learning the names of species creates a vitalizing intimacy with nature.<sup>2</sup> Species-oriented nature appreciation – from birdwatching to wildlife television – had a well-established place in late twentieth-century metropolitan cultures. Conservation biologists were able to draw on this popularity and build it, as they showed the importance of conserving the diversity of nature. Working together across lay and technical lines, conservation biologists and environmental activists have made attention to biodiversity – including the practice of making species lists – the first requirement of conservation itself.

*The environmental activists of the Rainforest Action Network transmit the latest communiqué from the U'wa people of Columbia: "We U'Wa will not cede our cultural, historic, and ancient rights. We prefer genocide sponsored by the Colombian government rather than handing over our Mother Earth to the oil companies".<sup>3</sup>*

The blossoming of the international campaign to save the Amazon forest in the late 1980s inspired a new political form: collaborations between indigenous leaders and environmentalists. Indigenous rights became entangled with conservation initiatives. Such collaborations were inspired in part by researchers who had found that indigenous people appreciated and managed the biodiversity with which they lived (e.g. Posey 1985).<sup>4</sup> It seemed possible that culturally sensitive alliances among scientists, activists, and indigenous peoples might make conservation possible in some rich, not-yet-simplified patches of nature.<sup>5</sup> In this spirit, conservationists have revitalized attention to the traditional knowledge of rural people. It seems hopeful that so many indigenous people are not only well-informed about biodiversity but also willing to share their knowledge with conservationists. Yet obstructions abound.

*Political ecologist Søren Hvalkof learns why the Siona Indians of the Ecuadorian Amazon refuse resource extraction contracts: "In impassioned voices they told revolting stories about how [during the early twentieth-century rubber boom] the local rubber patrons and their contractors had murdered, tortured, and abused their folks"<sup>6</sup>*

One obstruction is the terrifying history of past encounters through which indigenous knowledge has entered the metropolitan corpus of science and industry. Most of the economic products in use today for global agriculture and industry were introduced from the knowledges of rural people who knew and used these products; and this process of extraction continues.<sup>7</sup> This has not been a pretty history of mutual benefit. Infused with practices of enslavement, terror, theft, murder, and deceit, the expansion of European and "international" knowledge of economic products has been deeply entangled with subjugation. The current course of global capitalism suggests that such coercive and unequal collaborations will continue. Many of the most conspicuous models of conservationist collaboration (such as "rainforest marketing," in which local identification of economic plants is coupled with corporate production and distribution, and "biodiversity prospecting," in which rural people help scientists gather plants for corporate pharmaceutical development) have suffered from their refusal to repudiate this past history, instead of drawing from its legacy of exploitation.<sup>8</sup>

*Feminist theorist Noel Sturgeon offers a generous reading of the quirks and promises of U.S. ecofeminism, yet she worries that ecofeminist attention to indigenous knowledge, despite good intentions, reconstitutes white privilege: "One way this occurs is through the racial essentialism of the idea of the indigenous, which erases all difference between and within the categories 'Native American' and 'Third World' and constitutes them as racialized Others to a white Self that is Western, modern, and industrialized"<sup>9</sup>*

Another obstruction is the metropolitan romance that produces the categories with which we know "indigenous" people and "wild" nature. These are modernist categories in negation; they index people and places not included in "modern" landscapes, that is, landscapes in which planners have worked hard to subjugate variety for the cause of regularity, hygiene, property, efficiency, and profit. Because indigenous people and wild nature only exist in opposition to these modernist programs, any generalizations we make about them are likely to be wrong. We quickly ascend to a world of fantasy every time we imagine tribal survival or spirituality, or wild nature's competitive struggle or harmonious stability. These categories have a limited usefulness in helping us understand the idiosyncratic histories of particular social and natural landscapes. Yet it seems to me that we cannot give up these fantastical categories. It is only because of the protest embedded in them that some conservationists even

imagine collaboration across cultures to preserve the variety of nature. The alternative fantasy – a falsely uniform modernism – is much worse.

[...]

[...] The crux of the argument about indigenous people and conservation is that the regularizing modern imagination has had such a destructive effect on species diversity that almost any other human lifeway is likely to be better at maintaining it.<sup>10</sup> Farmers invade tropical forests when they are incorporated into modern political economies.<sup>11</sup> This attention to the historical and cultural specificity of modernist destruction is an important – and promising – divergence from more popular conservationist models, which posit all humanity in conflict with nature. It is worth attending to indigenous-conservationist collaborations just to give them some breathing room.

[...]

Scholars have consolidated their critical perspectives on conservation by looking for *contests* in which parties with different stakes – European hunters and African herders, resident farmers and urban nature lovers, foreign activists, and native tribes – struggle over the definition and use of nature.<sup>12</sup> This work usefully brings culture and politics together in understanding environmental conflicts; but there are other ways, too, to look at politics and culture. Much less attention has been paid to *collaborative* relationships through which environmental campaigns have been mounted. Collaboration is not necessarily good for all parties; to study it is not to pretend that easy solutions abound. Collaboration does, however, draw attention to the formation of new cultural and political configurations that change the arena of conflict, rather than just repeating old contests.

*"Turtles and Teamsters": The unlikely – and tentative – alliance between labor and environmentalism successfully closed down the World Trade Organization's meeting in Seattle in 1999.<sup>13</sup>*

In this spirit, I stride cautiously but with determination into the arena of conservationist-indigenous alliances. Even as seemingly innocent an activity as making species lists can find itself enmeshed in condescension and theft: Does the list stereotype indigenous knowledge, limiting future economic and political strategies for the group? Does it erase nascent intellectual property rights or make information available for corporate exploitation? To care about these questions does not turn me away from multicultural environmentalism. Instead, such questions sharpen my attention to the process of collaboration.

In drawing attention to our collaborative process, my first two steps are an acknowledgment of *eclectic knowledges* and *overlapping pleasures*. List-making is eclectic to the extent that it draws on multiple, fragmentary sources. Furthermore, any list made by two or more people is a negotiated, eclectic product. To acknowledge this eclecticism allows us to admire its creative use of limited materials, rather than to grasp only for scope. It allows us to imagine the list within historically changing conversations, rather than as transcendent knowledge. My input in the species list I made with Uma Adang blended a variety of historically particular genre conventions and forms of curiosity, ranging from scholarly fashions (writing with informants) to activist strategies, from childhood passions (nature appreciation) to fragmented biological observation in Kalimantan and elsewhere. Similarly, Uma Adang brought her own mixture of historically particular goals and resources to the task. The discussion between us sparked new items on the list by juxtaposing and blending our combined intellectual stock within the limited confines of an enthusiastic oral performance, held indoors and in that sometimes awkward mixture of regional dialects with which Uma

Adang always directed conversations even without my added blundering.

The eclecticism we produced is perhaps obvious – and I’ve tried to make it visible in the translations I offer by including Latin names only occasionally and by identifying organisms through an irregular mixture of Uma Adang’s and my own commentary. I ignore questions of classification, offering only the negotiated list. I am more interested in introducing my readers to plants and animals than in adding them to a biological or cultural master list. To speak to a heterogeneous readership, I mention, for example, that *lalamas* (#45) is an aroid, like taro, for those who care; for those who don’t, I hope that the image of heart-shaped leaves by the side of the stream beckons at least a little. This is, then, a motivated set of translations and not a simple addition to either universal or local cultural knowledge.

In other collaborative species lists, the Linnaean Latin name of an organism is paired dichotomously with a ‘local’ name; the Latin name offers international information, while the local name grounds it in a particular place and discovery process. Conservationist-indigenous collaborations have sometimes used these lists to argue that local names on the list represent a codified traditional knowledge, which can match at least in form its scientific counterpart. There are lots of good reasons to codify knowledge. Sometimes such codifications are a tool for historically marginalized people to gain a place in negotiations of their resource rights. Anthropological investigations of the breadth and detail of indigenous knowledge can play an important role in facilitating this process, and I am full of appreciation for such work. However, for the specific task of understanding collaboration, it is necessary to draw attention to the context in which communication and codification occur. This requires acknowledgment of the inevitable eclecticism and serendipity of the knowledge-making process. The systematic study of “Meratus ethnobiology” is another task.

A concern with collaboration also draws my attention to the overlapping pleasures of list-making. If lists have anything to do with conservation, it is because they exude a certain charisma: They make people exclaim in wonder at the diversity of nature; they can inspire us to preserve that diversity. Yet for urbanites outside of the practices of nature appreciation and conservation biology, such lists often seem dead bureaucratic forms. Who cares whether there are ten species of snails or ten thousand? To ask how list-making works as a form of collaboration in nature appreciation is to make that appreciation palpable. What pleasures motivate each side of the collaboration to participate?

For Uma Adang, the pleasures have been many. Consider the pleasure of storytelling: It is impossible to tell or listen to stories of Kalimantan without saying the names of plants and animals. People encounter a large variety of plants and animals every day. It is hard to talk about what people are doing or where they have been without talking about plants and animals. One of the pleasures of Uma Adang’s list was its incitement to remember and tell stories.

[...]

The stories we exchanged about snakes focused on the unusual and the unexpected. But the pleasures of the everyday and the ordinary are also told in stories and even lists of diversity. Plants and animals figure everywhere in Meratus Dayak livelihood practices and the stories through which they are savored and shared. Discussion of cultivation and gathering, for example, is all about the diversity of plants and animals and tastes and habitats. Foods are diverse in both forests and fields: the range of food plants gathered from the forest is matched by the range of crop varieties nurtured in swidden fields. Swidden plant variety is mulled over and discussed every time something is to be planted; every time a neighbor comes to ask for one of those ripe squash; every time a young couple borrows not just one but many kinds of rice seed to extend their social networks; every time a child demands *that* variety of banana and not that other one.

[...]

But we were speaking of pleasures, and particularly the pleasures of listing species, and I have not yet mentioned the most obvious: the making of the list itself. Uma Adang loved the idea that I was writing down the list and enumerating each item. For ease of taking notes, I started my numeration with “one” every time we switched to a new life-form. But Uma Adang always wanted to know the total, and I added and added again each time we took a break. Making it past one thousand items became a goal. The list took on all the pleasures of writing, counting, and classifying: Uma Adang and I were pretending to be bureaucrats with the authority of state and international codification. We were ordering the world by naming it. As Uma Adang explained to me, “Everyone knows these names; but not everyone knows how to organize them properly.”

[...]

#### **Labadi ai’ing Beings of the water**

1. iwak: the great white fish just called “fish”
2. anakan: another white fish
3. masapi: a big eel, as big around as a person’s arm, it hides in holes but can be lured out at night with chicken guts
4. usei: another freshwater eel, also delicious
5. kambalang: a tasty fish
6. tilan: a thin, scaly fish, like an eel
7. manki: a green fish with red tail and fins
8. puyao: another green fish
9. lampam: a white fish with a red mouth and tail
10. bidugung: a yellow fish, 3 fingers wide
11. badaris: a small white fish
12. saluwang: a minnow
13. kanduri: a catfish
14. kihung: a long black fish

#### **These are found in seasonal creeks and swamps:**

15. alirao: a catfish
16. la’is [*Belodontichthys dinema*]: a catfish
17. sambunit: a small catfish
18. tamparisay: a fish, 4 fingers wide
19. panting: a catfish
20. puntur: a long fish
21. sanggiringan: the size of a person’s thumb, it swims in schools
22. lampuk: a catfish similar to la’is
23. walut [*Monopterus albus*]: a small swamp eel

#### **These have legs:**

24. bidawang: a large turtle
25. biyanan: a small turtle
26. kuntan: a tortoise
27. kuduk: a common frog
28. kungkung: a toad
29. ambulahang: a green toad
30. i’rak: another toad
31. karantung: a frog; “the music of the deep water”
32. tangkaricak: a tiny frog that calls day and night

## Endnotes

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- [13] Joe Berry, "Sea turtles and teamsters together at last," *Labornet Newslines*, December 19, 1999. <http://www.labornet.org/news/123199/08.html>.

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# Planting and imaging precarity in Charles Lim's SEASTATE 9: proclamation garden

*This essay discusses the biophysical politics and strategies inhering within Charles Lim Yi Yong's SEA STATE 9: proclamation garden (2019), an installation for the annual Roof Garden commission at the National Gallery Singapore. The commission expands on Lim's over a decade-long SEA STATE series of works that look critically at the seas, coasts, waterbodies, and waterways in and around Singapore, by turning his attention towards the plant life that has been quietly inhabiting the reclaimed margins of the island, using it to uncover neglected narratives that run parallel to the opprobrium raised by land reclamation and the sand trade.*

text by **Adele Tan**

**W**e landed upon Obin and hoisting the British flag took possession of this and the neighbouring islands under a salute of 21 guns. ...Obin is about six miles long and the largest island in the straits—tolerably elevated, and as usual, covered with a great forest. Wherever examined, the rock formation was a small-grained granite. After going through the ceremony of hoisting the flag, we passed through the little strait which divides Obin from Katan. **At the eastern extremity of it on the Obin shore, a remarkable mass of granite falls abruptly into the sea. This was covered with beautiful creeping plants; many of them in flower, and with some rare ferns and mosses, all of which would have afforded a scientific botanist a month's interesting occupation.** Such a scene, in a tropic forest, is not so frequent as might be supposed; on account of the prevalence of tall trees without branches for 60 or 100 feet up, which are at once themselves inaccessible, while they exclude, in a great degree, the lowly plants which would be within reach.<sup>1</sup>

Gun salutes, the hoisting of the flag, and the registration of life of the land. These ceremonial acts were how newly prospected land was proclaimed as sovereign in colonial times. The managerial ethos of efficiency that has accompanied Singapore's nation-building years as an independent state, however, strikes a different relationship with our *terra firma*. This is especially clear in the expansion of our coastal limits via reclamation. With no pomp and circumstance, nor any *bon mots* of observation to spare, proclamations of new land by our Heads of State now are merely effected through administrative and executive documents. These remain largely out of public view, held in reams in the bowels of the civil service, and published expeditiously in the *Singapore Government Gazette*. The enactment of its legal force is left ritually unperformed until one notices the consequent activities that take place on the land as a result, in which it is unceremoniously cleared of its vegetation and handed over to new owners and users. Getting our eyes off what is happening on the edges of the island is consequent to the Singapore government getting our attention off the waters

of Singapore, as can be gleaned from Lim's gloss on the Singapore Navy's recruitment advertisement: "They make sure you don't even have to think about the sea. Ever." The citizens' right to informational scrutiny is therefore masked by the assuaging of public anxiety and the performance of political comfort in what the artist has called the "romanticisation of the sea".<sup>2</sup>

Although the ritual performance of flag-planting and hoisting, and other aggressively demonstrative declarations of sovereignty, are no longer in common use internationally in the wake of remonstrance against their colonialist associations, they still have powerful symbolic purchase as emblems of national achievement and pride when enacted in strategic areas or activities taking place out of our conventional range of sight. Flag planting has been a rejuvenated ritual in our postcolonial age, none more so than in outer space, this and last century's *terra nullius* where a renewed technological and exploratory race has ignited the efforts and imaginations of several major countries, namely the United States, Russia, China, and India, assisted by the ventures of celebrity corporate entrepreneurs like Richard Branson (Virgin Galactic) and Elon Musk (SpaceX). Performed rituals of territoriality however have to be considered alongside the slew of legislative treatises that are set in motion because of the history of these symbolic rituals. The face of nation-state sovereignty has required both ritual enactment and legislative action to codify, recognise and control what countries can or cannot do within the remit of their own sovereign power. Two years before the United States planted the American flag on the moon in 1969, the country was a signatory alongside 109 other countries that ratified the Outer Space Treaty administered and arbitrated by the International Court of Justice. The treaty makes clear that celestial bodies in outer space are "not subject to claims of national appropriation by claim of sovereignty, by means of use or occupation, or by any other means".<sup>3</sup> However, this does not yet explicitly exclude property rights by countries or citizens of such countries over parts of the Moon, or in short, the ability of countries to competitively exploit the Moon as a resource for profit gain.<sup>4</sup> On the whole it may seem as if internationally agreed and binding legal rules and frameworks are winning out over sporadic forms of territorial rituals, but the reality is that bureaucratic, scientific and legalistic methods guaranteed by various state and international institutions do not fully secure the public and political acceptance of territorial boundaries as they morph and expand over time, and most certainly do not prevent the irruption of legally insignificant rituals that have maximum public relations impact globally, such as when in 2007 Russian explorers dropped a titanium flag with the country's colours 4,261 meters into the seabed at the North Pole's ice cap, staking a symbolic claim over the potential energy resources thereby stretching its proportional territorial reach, arguing that "the Arctic seabed and Siberia are linked by one continental shelf" and predictably raising the ire of the United States, Canada, Norway and Denmark who co-share the economic zone of the Arctic.<sup>5</sup>

Unlike the dramatic spectacles of the larger superpowers, Singapore's preference for legal paper trails and rule-based engagements over symbolic rituals should come as no surprise, given its diminutive physical size and long-running territorial and maritime disputes with its neighbour, Malaysia, which are also propelled by economic and developmental motivations. Singapore's posture of reason and rationality cements a belief that the latest agreements and legally based interpretations will prevail over other forms of justifications and claims, namely that of historical relations and narratives. Disputes over boundaries, paths, and passages, often in relation to land reclamation, often had to be decided via the rules established in The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the rulings of the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS). But Singapore's successes at the court of law, even if mired in regulations and principles that are as complex as they are vague, does

not always win it goodwill from its regional neighbours, especially when the optics are that Singapore is expropriating sand, land, and waters from its economically less well-off Southeast Asian counterparts. The Singapore government's doctrinaire association with and passion for facts legal, scientific and historical in its governance, has meant an overt declarative spurning of narratives or objective truths that it does not see as verifiable. These other sorts of utterances, hermeneutics, legends, and mythic foundational stories should be regarded as propaganda, and cannot be relied upon to undergird claims of legitimacy.<sup>6</sup> Yet more recently, the government has come to realise the persuasive powers of historical narratives that go beyond traditional verifiable temporal markers, yielding similar affective force as that of practiced rituals. The Singapore Bicentennial celebrations in 2019, which began as the commemoration of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles' arrival and founding of Singapore in 1819, ended with a dilation of the story's aperture, to include within its ambit through the fabled figure of Palembang prince Sang Nila Utama, an acknowledgment of the preceding empires of Sriwijaya and Majapahit, and the Sultanates of Malacca and Johor, in the making of Singapore. Historical narratives that have mythic proportions and deep temporal dimensions have been useful tools to subtly shape the consciousness and feelings of belonging of its citizens, and at the same time bond their identity more tightly to its Southeast Asian neighbours, which for a long time was written up by the country's ruling elites as Singapore's blight and burden.<sup>7</sup> This regionalist regard may have only been allegorically alluded to in the Bicentennial commemorations, but this concession, this elision of Raffles from his expected pedestal, could be taken as a gentle motioning towards an existential openness for the nation but which is also wrapped up in political utility.

For Singapore artist Charles Lim Yi Yong—who has been surveying the physical, cultural and ideological transformations of Singapore's waterways, seas, and shores for over a decade in his *SEA STATE* series to query what makes up the elusive but consequential borders of nationhood—this jettisoning of ritual formality from the colonial times and the effacement of mythic foundations indexes a categorical shift in the historiography of Singapore. We have since swapped out the image and memory of the act of dramatic discovery in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with that of industrious, albeit sci-technocratic, creation in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. From its champions to its critics, Singapore's history has been popularly written and received through land statistics; one oft-repeated description is that the country's landmass has grown by over 25 percent since 1965 due to the accelerated pace of land reclamation.<sup>8</sup> A corollary of land reclamation statistics is the parallel investigation on the licit and illicit movements of sand and granular aggregates, the very raw material that enables reclamation, and its problematic inscrutability: the contracting, buying, stockpiling and distribution of sand (often from neighbouring Southeast Asian countries) by state entities in Singapore for developmental and security purposes.<sup>9</sup> Lim's own *SEA STATE* series is also presented as a long-range assiduous, subtle, and seemingly detached tracking of land reclamation and sand, which the artist considers to be a stream of neutral gestures, via the plotting of sustained and documented attention to the fates of small islands, lighthouses, buoys, rocky breakwaters, barges, caissons and fences in the waters off Singapore through his multi-modal installations of digital photographs and videos, marine charts and cartographic maps. The most well-known of these would be his large barnacle-encrusted buoy titled "Sajahat" that sat in the middle of his Singapore Pavilion showcase at the Venice Biennale in 2015, named after Pulau Sajahat (evil, or naughty, island), which formerly hosted British military encampments but had disappeared off our nautical charts in 2002 when it was incorporated along with its smaller sister island Pulau Sajahat Kechil into the larger island of Pulau Tekong (sequestered by the Singapore government solely for military training exercises).<sup>10</sup> Lim's buoy is an effective witness-marker of the country's changing geographies through persistent land reclamation, not only through the memorialising of its geo-located name, but also the artist's speculative observation that the faster-than-expected growth of the barnacles on his newly-sunk buoy was due to reclamation works generating greater

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water pressures and accelerated tidal flows which more intensely circulated nutrients to feed the barnacles.

This epic modelling of Singapore is however not a post-Independence occurrence. Raffles was already the progenitor of this reclamation process from as early as 1822, draining out the marsh areas of the south bank of Boat Quay by employing a few hundred coolies to level a nearby hillock to fill in the swampy grounds that were then sold off for profit.<sup>11</sup> While the commercial impetus for reclamation has not changed since, the human labour involved in the process has been traded in for the speed and cost-effectiveness of machinery, and now takes place at the fringes of the country. Although Raffles' reclamation projects came before the enactment of the Foreshores Act that began with an ordinance in 1872, in which the legal sanctity of land proclamations is enshrined, he would probably not be satisfied by the mere bureaucratic paper exercise of Presidential proclamations but insist upon the declamatory performance of speech and public address.<sup>12</sup> The ritual performance of the British Empire in its various dominions (especially India) is well known and as a representative agent of the Empire, Raffles would have been steeped in the demonstrative theatrics of power.<sup>13</sup> And as if heeding the gun salutes accompanying the British possession of islands, Lim's visually luscious video work in 2018, *SEA STATE 9: proclamation (drag), (drop), (pour)*, could thus be seen as the artist's cunning attempt to force the surfacing of hitherto hidden postcolonial and post-Independence power infrastructures through aesthetic and therefore more visibly palpable means. Drone footage documenting the various methods involved in the building of new landmasses at sea capture the movement of sand and aggregates, like the sand hopper mesmerically pouring sand into the sea, where the miniscule (sand) when shown en masse is made almost majestic. Yet, for the artist, the video also calls out the missing part of the equation: "without the Presidential proclamation consecrating these new spaces, [they] remain officially recognised as being sea".<sup>14</sup> What follows is Lim's work-in-progress, *SEA STATE 9: proclamation: the sandpapers*, where the artist deep-dives into the Singapore Government Gazette for all of the land proclamations made by the country's Presidents and representatives since Independence, which he then compiles into booklets, assigning a booklet to each of the Presidents.<sup>15</sup> Ensuing from these booklets is a comically dispassionate diagram-graph that places the Presidents' (and their official signatory stand-ins') photo portraits in a line and with their photos sized in proportion to the volume of proclamation documents that their respective tenures have produced – President S.R. Nathan occupies the diagram's central position even though he chronologically comes after President Ong Teng Cheong. These, however, remain reproductions and inferences from the Gazette, and we are still lacking the bodily presence of the authentic document, the vestiges of the President's hand, signature, and seal, in place of the *Locus Sigilli* that marks the bottom left of each Gazette proclamation.<sup>16</sup> Lim's urgent search for a look-in on an original proclamation document signed and sealed by a sitting President of Singapore led him to also ask, imagine and speculate what the attendant ritual process might be like, even though the reality is that the President is likely to be presented with the proclamation document like any other document and dispatching it as efficiently as possible as befitting a productive bureaucrat. The Presidential proclamations of state land post-reclamation under the Foreshores Act would have been far too numerous and repetitive for the action of signing to be enacted with complex and time-consuming rituals.<sup>17</sup>

A turning point comes however in Lim's *SEA STATE 9: proclamation garden*, a project for the annual commission of the Ng Teng Fong Roof Garden Gallery at National Gallery Singapore. The commissioned project follows from his other *SEA STATE* projects in furthering the artist's investigation into the geographic margins of this island-state, mapping and researching the processes



**Charles Lim Yi Yong**

*SEA STATE 9: alfian proclaims the garden*, 2019, C-print on paper © Charles Lim Yi Yong

of how as land in Singapore comes into being, another silent but significant subject comes into focus – plants.<sup>18</sup> Flora that so captivated John Henry Moor at Obin is now given the attention of the artist, as much as the politically and ecologically bedevilled sand, because the project entails a full-scale monumental transformation of the roof garden, in which Lim mandated that all extant ornamental and defensive landscaping is removed and replaced with species of plants found across reclaimed areas around Singapore, from Changi to Tuas and the Southern Islands. Turning away from the contentious topic of sand proves to be a winning gambit – plant life as subject matter is immediately less objectionable and in Singapore, rides on the popular appeal of environmental greening. Gardens (vertical and rooftop, botanical and "by the Bay") and parks (forests, reservoirs, zoos), as well as new-age agricultural farms and aquariums, are part of the sustainability optics playing out in Singapore. More crucially, plants become the gentle decoy and camouflage for the artist to solicit the cooperation of government agencies like the Singapore Land Authority (SLA), and



**Charles Lim Yi Yong**

*Photo of the central platform at the roof garden of the National Gallery Singapore, hosting the nursery with plants collected from reclamation sites.*

Courtesy of Adel Tan © Charles Lim Yi Yong

the Jurong Town Corporation (JTC) for access to restricted reclamation work sites in Tuas on the far western end of Singapore, and most importantly, the eventual receipt of a scanned image of an actual signed and sealed proclamation by President Halimah Yacob, the first female in the line of Singapore Presidents. Working on a major commission at the National Gallery Singapore not only gave the artist an official gloss at the time as means to engage the authorities, but it also provided *SEA STATE 9* an added point of connection to the artefactual meaning of proclamations: at the Gallery was the exhibition “Law of the Land: Highlights of Singapore’s Constitutional Documents”, fittingly hosted within the Chief Justice’s Chamber and Office at the Supreme Court Wing of the Gallery.<sup>19</sup>

By yoking the words “proclamation” and “garden,” which allude to certitude, order, and purposiveness, Lim instead makes them augur the very opposite for the plants he introduces to the Gallery’s roof garden which, now transplanted from their natural habitats, live on borrowed time. While accusations of the expropriation of sand from neighbouring countries, the thorny moral politics, and ecological ramifications of land reclamation in Singapore have been well discussed and debated by many scholars and commentators in local and foreign media, what has escaped attention is the varied species

of plants that make their base on these parcels of land.<sup>20</sup> In fact, a diversity of the hardiest of flora grows from the peculiar composition of ground fill of the area, usually comprising nutrient deficient clayey subsoil from inland areas or infertile marine sand dredged from seabeds. Many have adjusted to the harsh environmental conditions of the coastal waves, salt sprays, and heat, such as the numerous mangrove species that have evolved systems to excrete excess salt away or cope with regular underwater submergence such as the *Sesuvium portulacastrum* (seashore purslane). Conventional expositions and receptions of land reclamation in Singapore often cede to the government an almost absolutist power to determine all outcomes with ease:

*The environmental consequences of remodeling the coastline—an altered ecology, wetlands rubbed off the map—can be waved away. Residents can be moved so that projects can proceed. In Singapore’s quandary of where to put its people, the people themselves—the living as well as the dead—can seem like pieces on a checkerboard.<sup>21</sup>*

The intransigent and motley crew of plants in Lim’s proclamation garden, however, give lie to this façade of totalizing control over life on the island of Singapore, refusing to yield to the will of the artist and the Gallery, thriving in ways not expected or steadfastly resisting successful propagation on the roof garden even if one’s methods were following the planting prescriptions of best practices to a tee. The commission entailed the collaboration of many different parties and different types of expertise and experience when it came to the plants: it had two landscaping companies, one botanical consultant and one plant conservationist who were brought in at different points of the project, and an artist and curator who were absorbing new and disparate botanical knowledge on the fly. The central deck of the roof garden (usually used as the key artwork platform for each commissioned artist) was transformed into a shaded working nursery, holding spare stocks of plants collected from the reclamation sites and given extra care so that they would multiply or grow in strength, and to be eventually used as replacements for plants that had failed out in the open.<sup>22</sup> Still the results were uneven; the much-feared (and fantasised) parasitic species that were collected did not take to the roof garden environment and failed to grow to their full extent because of the different parameters of water, light, and space that were the result of the design of the building’s roof garden and the maintenance logic of the Gallery.

Many plants found on newly reclaimed sites have either been propagated spontaneously or cultivated conscientiously by government agencies, as is the case for the rows of *Casuarina equisetifolia* trees in East Coast Park. Among these, a good number will be “exotics”, a term used in botanical classification for externally introduced species that does not naturally occur in the area and has been brought in accidentally or intentionally by man, that comes in with foreign grades of sand or through the food that migrant workers who toil on the land habitually eat (which could explain why the artist found a date palm growing at the Tuas site). This heterogeneous mix of plants also includes native species, like the *Ipomoea pes caprae*, an early colonising ground cover, whose creeping stems spread rapidly to bind sand grains on bare shores and whose roots form a stable soil that accumulate humus to balance nitrogen levels. Finally, much of the vegetation is tagged as belonging to the pest or weed species, and in the court of common opinion lacking conservation value or deemed parasitic or invasive and therefore pegged to be eradicated, even though weeds could be argued for as plants whose potential for use and consumption has yet to be fully discovered. These include the *Imperata cylindrica*, commonly known as Lalang grass, whose deep rhizomatic roots make it extremely difficult to remove thoroughly. It also exhibits allelopathy, releasing chemicals that inhibit the germination or growth

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of other plants, thereby allowing it to dominate large swathes of open land.<sup>23</sup> Or the *Cassyta filiformis*, a cousin of dodder vines which lives by parasitising on susceptible plants nearby, slowly weakening its host plant over time through a vampiric vascular feature known as *haustoria*, where the cell walls of the host are penetrated and then inhabited by the feeding visitor. But what is less botanically perceptible though no less important is the shifting conceptual ground that the reclaimed sites are demonstrating through their plants with regards to our taxonomic and value systems. Rounding up species of plants as unwanted weeds and noxious parasites paves an easy path for their removal according to our human desires and determinants. Yet if we follow Michel Serres' radical re-examination of the trope of parasites as abusers who take and not give, he reveals instead the host-parasite dynamic as the foundational birth of the possibility of the relations of exchange and communication, where none might occur before:

The parasite adopts a functional role; the host survives the parasite's abuses of him – he even survives in the literal sense of the word; his life finds a reinforced equilibrium, like a sur-equilibrium. A kind of reversibility is seen on the ground of irreversibility. Use succeeds abuse, and exchange follows use. A contract can be imagined.<sup>24</sup>

Indeed, recent research on the dodder vine (both *cuscuta* and *cassytha* varieties) has surfaced the genus' communicative prowess, whose dense and strangling vine mats can be regarded as a network (akin to internet cables) to bridge and connect the different host plants the vines parasitise, performing invaluable service as a molecular alarm signal system warning the host plants nearby against other invading insects and threats.<sup>25</sup> Arguments made on behalf of preserving biodiversity have often lurched towards the conservation of native species, rhetorised alongside the dreaded term "extinction" (with non-natives being invasive), and the definition of "native" has been based on an idea of nature that is static and enduring. Can "exotic" plants eventually become naturalised and reclassified as native? How do we contend with the term "exotic" if we are to see it coterminous with words like "foreign" and "migrant"?<sup>26</sup> As broad swathes of biogeographic zones and their limits change due to climate change and global warming, plants have also moved in tandem across their traditional boundaries seeking more suitable climes, whilst propelling new questions to be asked about the assisted migration of non-native plants that are themselves climate refugees.<sup>27</sup> As an artwork in a public art museum, the expectation is that information related to the artwork should be openly disseminated so as to further the knowledge and experience of the visitor. This pressure towards naming, knowability, and legibility is however thwarted by Lim, who upends the conventional use of plant tags, which habitually host the species and varietal name for the easy identification of the plant, by writing one word per tag, the words in a refrain of the President's proclamation document, as if the plants were inducted into an investiture of citizenship without heed to where they are from:

NOW, THEREFORE, I, President of the Republic of Singapore, in exercise of the powers conferred upon me as aforesaid, DO HEREBY DECLARE that the abovementioned one piece of land of which the said piece of land is more particularly described in the Schedule hereto shall as from the date hereof be State land.<sup>28</sup>

As a work of art, *SEA STATE 9: proclamation garden* is one that is a constant work in progress, mired at times in confusion of species and the ever possibility



**Charles Lim Yi Yong**

*SEA STATE 9: proclamation garden*, 2019. On one of the reclamation sites in Tuas, Singapore.

Image courtesy of Adele Tan © Charles Lim Yi Yong

of propagation failure or entropy, but always revelling in the indeterminacy engendered by the complexities of the renewed ecosystem at the Gallery. Even the country's statutory board NParks are keen to remind the population in its publications that "in reality, nature is never as clear cut and as straightforward as the many theories propose".<sup>29</sup> Although *SEA STATE 9: proclamation garden's* initial impulse was to show how the instantiation of land proclamation kickstarts the process of land clearing for other developmental needs, and that the demise of these varied species becomes an eventuality, the reality is that these species persist in other ways and at other sites; as long as land reclamation continues and has to be left for consolidation before use, the plants, albeit a different mix of them, will continue to inhabit the new land plots. One might argue that Lim's herculean endeavour to move plants from reclamation sites to the Gallery's roof garden or contrive the growth of plants from wildly different habitats, comes uncomfortably close to the Singapore government's own mode of interventionist planting. Under this mode, the country's ability to govern and exercise control is indexed by its capability for extensive and precise gardening—expressed not only in the clearing of vegetation (an act that already connotes structural



Charles Lim Yi Yong

One of the new plants

from Tuas, Singapore

© Charles Lim Yi Yong

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violence) but also the conscientious plotting and planning of different types of landscaping throughout the island, down to allocating locations where selected jungles or primary forests might be left, which only serves to remind the anxious citizenry what might terrorise (i.e. Nature) if left untamed.<sup>30</sup> Even Singapore government ministers, like George Yeo, cannot resist adopting the metaphor of gardening when speaking about potential terrorists entering Singapore:

If we do enough gardening, we can have a beautiful and colourful garden. But someone must do the gardening to make sure that the weeds do not overgrow, and pests don't come in and eat up the flowers. Then we can have a beautiful garden. So, amidst this beautiful picture, there are laws and security precautions.<sup>31</sup>

Malaysia too was not shy about using botanical imagery when it referred to its own Internal Security crackdown in 1987 as *Operasi Lalang* or Operation Lalang, a police operation to weed out persons or activities deemed to be stoking racial tensions in the country. Where the Malaysian authorities saw the Lalang as emblematic of a potent antagonist that must be eradicated at all cost, Malaysian artist Wong Hoy Cheong discovered another discursive path to the plant, through the Guattari-Deleuzian framing of its rhizomatic root structure, using it to theorise another alternative vision of social and biological life that allows for heterogeneous connectivity, non-hierarchical multiplicity and the ability to generate new points of trajectory out of ruptures, thus resistant to the imaginary fixations of origin and source.<sup>32</sup> Wong's *Studies for Lalang I, II, and III* from 1994 take the Lalang plant as their philosophical and artistic resource, and also an aide-memoire helping him to call up the egregious acts of arrest and detention by the government in 1987. This was a fortuitous act of ironic reversal given that Wong's first encounters with Lalang were motivated by the wish to expunge the plant that was overwhelming his Selangor studio-shack.<sup>33</sup> Wong eventually turned to the Lalang plant as his main constituent material for his two-week-long outdoor installation and performance at the Pusat Kreatif of the National Art Gallery in Kuala Lumpur in October 1994.<sup>34</sup> Over several days, the artist sprayed weedkiller over the lawn areas that were planted with Lalang for over two months beforehand, and then later proceeded to cut, burn and dig out the roots of the dead Lalang. Finally, he replaced the removed Lalang with cow grass, reinstating the site to its former condition, metaphorically parodying but also protesting and remembering the actions of the Malaysian police in 1987.<sup>35</sup>

Lim's *SEA STATE 9: proclamation garden* however achieves something different at its museum location. Lim's gesture bothers the given infrastructure and culture of the Gallery, having its seemingly illogical or preposterous demand disrupt the smooth logic of operational convenience. Lim proceeds from an attitude of experimentation, of empirical trial and error, working through the standard procedures, red-tape, and requisite landscaping contractors (who were befuddled initially by his ideas and request), but without settling into any pre-given conclusion of what this garden may look like or contain. If an art museum is a safe place to ask unsafe questions and thinks unsafe thoughts, then Lim pushes the ante a little further by posing new physical risks to the museum's inhabitants and visitors—the thorns of the mimosa or the sandburs will prick, the bees may sting and the birds may attack. What Lim does is to recalibrate the habitual behaviours of museum staff and the public: the lip-service paid to the greening movement of Singapore cannot hold at bay what also needs to happen naturally. In giving the roof garden back to the visitors through the takedown of the original protective hedges and shrubs, and creating space for resting and socialising, visitors will also need to accept the coexistence of fauna other than themselves.

#### Charles Lim Yi Yong

*SEA STATE 9: proclamation garden*, 2019. The cassytha filiformis plant found on reclamation sites in Tuas, Singapore, coalescing into thick cable-like bands. Image courtesy of Adele Tan © Charles Lim Yi Yong



**Charles Lim Yi Yong**

*SEA STATE 9: proclamation garden, 2019. Plant tags with words from the Presidential proclamation written on them.*

Image courtesy of Adele Tan © Charles Lim Yi Yong

Singapore... was but a lump of green foliage in the engirdling sea, of a green so green that it was almost possible to hear it growing in the silence, each blade, each leaf, each tendon and limb extending its dominion over everything within reach, a continuation of the great Malayan jungle to the north.<sup>36</sup>

The images of the plants on the Gallery's roof garden in the exhibition catalogue accompanying the commission are not the usual botanical photographic portraits that one finds in scientific textbooks and taxonomies. Arranged and taken by Lim, the close-up angles and alluring colouration of the plant snippets speak to the artist's interest in a formal difference and dissociation from the conventional modes of botanical representation, whether in science or art. The images are beguiling and cause an intentional momentary difficulty in recognition (or even inciting wilful misrecognition), as if the plants are aesthetically *détourned*, to borrow a term from the Situationists.<sup>37</sup> Information accompanying each plant image is kept deliberately spare—only the scientific name, common name, and a casual collection of anecdotal or folkloric notes are included. The artist's treatment of the plants remains laconic and unembellished, acknowledging that these are after all species that are mostly classed now as uneconomic, invasive weeds or plants that have not yet entered the public imagination and knowledge in Singapore, despite the best efforts of our plant specialists, educators, and advocates. The endeavour here is not about valorising the plants on reclamation sites nor advocating for the conservation of such plants, but to cast another eye on the (plant) life in the landscape that Singapore has created for itself. The plant profiles in this book will ensure that one does not just hear the density of plant life at the edges of the country that grow in the silence, but also see them through a different critical aperture.

Note: The author of this paper is also the curator of the named commissioned artwork at the National Gallery Singapore in 2019. This paper is an expanded version of the essay produced for the catalogue accompanying the exhibition and artwork.

### Endnotes

- [1] John Henry Moor, "Journal of a Voyage Round the Island of Singapore," *Singapore Chronicle*, November 1825, 268–269. This article is an account of John Crawfurd's formal possession of Singapore and its adjacent islands in 1825. Crawfurd, who was appointed Resident of Singapore in 1823, set off in August 1825 on a 10-day journey around Singapore on his ship the Malabar and landed at Pulau Ubin.
- [2] Refer to Lim's 2015 video collaboration with Candy Factory's Takiji Kogo for *Life Wouldn't Be The Same Without Safe Seas*, <https://www.seastate.sg/with-candy-factory>. See also Mark Rappolt, "Charles Lim: SEA STATE", 28 April 2016, first published in the Summer 2015 issue of *ArtReview Asia*, <https://artreview.com/summer-2015-ara-feature-charles-lim/>
- [3] See "Treaty on Principles Governing the Activities of States in the Exploration and Use of Outer Space, including the Moon and Other Celestial Bodies", in United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs, <https://www.unoosa.org/oosa/en/ourwork/spacelaw/treaties/introouterspacetreaty.html>, accessed 8 March 2021. The treaty also requires celestial bodies to be used for peaceful purposes, bearing no military outposts, and countries are compelled to assist the astronauts of other states and cooperate internationally, in recognition of the ideal that outer space is humanity's common heritage.
- [4] See Donald R Rothwell and Imogen Saunders, "Does a US flag on the Moon amount to a claim of sovereignty under law?", *The Interpreter*, published 25 July 2019, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/does-us-flag-moon-amount-claim-sovereignty>, accessed 8 March 2021.
- [5] Guy Falconbridge, "Russian sub plants flag under North Pole", published 2 August 2007, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idINIndia-28784420070802>. See also Kristin Bartenstein, "Flag-planting: What legal framework governs the division of the Arctic continental shelf?", *International Journal*, Winter 2009-10, p 187-206.
- [6] See Loh Kah Seng, "Within the Singapore Story: The Use and Narrative of History in Singapore", *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (1998), pp. 1-21.
- [7] See Terence Chong, "The Bicentennial Commemoration: Imagining and Re-imagining Singapore's History", *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 2020, (2020), pp. 323-334.
- [8] Matthew Schneider-Mayerson, "Some Islands Will Rise: Singapore in the Anthropocene", *Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities*, Vol. 4, No. 2-3 (Spring-Fall 2017), p. 168.
- [9] One of the most cited accounts of this would be Joshua Comaroff's article "Built on Sand: Singapore and the New State of Risk." *Harvard Design Magazine*, no. 39. 2014, <http://www.harvarddesign-magazine.org/issues/39/built-on-sand-singapore-and-the-new-state-of-risk>.

[10] Another Singapore artist who was interested in the critical recovery of lost landmasses and landmarks due to land reclamation is Debbie Ding. See Ding's *The Library of Pulau Saigon*, which looked at articulating the disappearance of a former island in the Singapore River, through a speculative re-creation and re-reading of its archaeological remains <http://www.dbbd.sg/works/the-library-of-pulau-saigon.php>

[11] See "Hill That Was Removed To Make Room for Singapore," *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 17 June 1933, 8; "Singapore's First Land Reclamation Begins: 1822," last modified 2014, <http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/history/events/fedd2a-2074-4ae6-b272-dc0db80e2146>; and Lim Tin Seng, "Land From Sand: Singapore's Reclamation Story," *Biblioasia Features*, Volume 13 Issue 1 (April–June 2017), <http://www.nlb.gov.sg/biblioasia/2017/04/04/land-from-sand-singapores-reclamation-story/>

[12] The Foreshores Ordinance in 1872 was more properly known as Ordinance VIII of 1872: An Ordinance for the Regulation of Ports and Harbours.

[13] See for instance Giordano Nanni, *The Colonisation of Time: Ritual, Routine and Resistance in the British Empire* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012). Britain also invented a new slew of rituals when they exited the Empire. See David Cannadine, "How Britain said Farewell to its Empire," *BBC*, 23 July 2010, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-10740852>.

[14] Charles Lim, *SEA STATE 9: proclamation (drag), (drop), (pour)*, Single-channel HD video (on loop), with output to high-luminosity seamless monitor, 6:34 mins ('(drag)'); 13:30 mins ('(drop)'); 2:30 mins ('(pour)'), <https://www.singaporeartmuseum.sg/about/our-collection/sea-state-9-proclamation>

[15] The booklets were shown as *SEA STATE 9: proclamation* in the exhibition "After the End of the World", at the Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona, 25 October 2017 to 1 May 2018.

[16] See also Seok Yeng Beverly Fok, *Chattel Land: Legal and Labor Histories of Reclamation in Singapore*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, July 2020, pp 1-10. Fok muses philosophically on the presence of the signature and the authorizing of land reclamations.

[17] One of the other reasons why Lim wanted to look more closely at the proclamations was for the indexing of the lot numbers in the schedule of each document so that he would track and map out how the different and small plots of land in Singapore were reclaimed over time and matching it to the President that proclaimed them. But as the base reference maps have also changed over time, there was no dependable systemic consistency to the declared lot numbers.

[18] Plants were however not the first thing that came to the artist's mind for the roof garden commission. The initial proposals from Lim involved shoving and suspending a large piece of fencing (the same fence found at the perimeters of reclamation sites) through the rooftop pools of the Gallery as if it were a blade penetrating the roof and into the courtyard below, as well as dyeing the water of the pools with colouring that would also chromatically change the lighting conditions of the Gallery, akin to how the dropping of sand into the sea would affect the clarity of the surrounding waters.

[19] The exhibition is in fact organised by the National Archives of Singapore and the National Library Board, and not the National Gallery Singapore: "The exhibition explores the history of Singapore's constitutional development from a British settlement in 1819 to its emergence as a sovereign republic in 1965. It presents a selection of 23 rare documents from the NAS and NLB's collections, each capturing a key moment in Singapore's legal history and journey to independence."

[20] Some examples of such discourse include William Jamieson, "There's Sand in My Infinity Pool: Land Reclamation and the Rewriting of Singapore," *GeoHumanities* 3, no. 2 (2017): 396–413; and more recently, Emily Buder, "When Your Land Is Stolen From Beneath Your Feet," *The Atlantic*, 11 Mar 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/video/index/584563/singapore-cambodia/> that features Kalyanee Mam's documentary *Lost World*. Biological scientists tend to make more persuasive arguments for the study of the vegetation on reclaimed areas. See for instance, Hugh T.W. Tan et al, *The Natural Heritage of Singapore* (Singapore: Prentice Hall, 2010); and Yee, Corlett, Yew and Tan, "The vegetation of Singapore – an updated map," in *Gardens' Bulletin Singapore* 63, no. 1 & 2 (2011): 205–212.

[21] Samanth Subramanian, "How Singapore is Creating More Land for Itself," *The New York Times*, 20 April 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/20/magazine/how-singapore-is-creating-more-land-for-itself.html>.

[22] The shaded platform also functioned as a free form installation space for play, where the placement of the different pots of plants were reconfigured from time to time over the duration of the exhibition by the artist. Lim moved in found objects and plants (like coconuts) from his own sailing and swim outings near Changi and the Southern Islands. Deck chairs were eventually added to the platform so that visitors could also use it as a social space for personal respite.

[23] Attempts to manage Lalang have a long and animated history; whilst it is a solidly resilient plant, it is also not ineradicable. The two main ways are by burning or flooding the plant out or by having an animal plough tilling the land and destroying the root system. What has not been sustained is the research and development into finding industrial use cases for Lalang, like that of papermaking. See J. M. Hillier, "Lalang Grass. (*Imperata arundinacea*, Cyrilly)", *Bulletin of Miscellaneous Information* (Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew), Vol. 1909, No.2 (1909), pp. 55-59.

[24] Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, trans Lawrence R Schehr (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), p. 168.

[25] Ed Yong, "The Parasite That Wires Plants Together", *The Atlantic*, 1 September 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2017/08/the-parasite-that-wires-plants-together/537141/>, accessed 8 March 2021. See also Arjan Banerjee, "Inter-plant communication via parasitic bridging", *Journal of Experimental Botany*, Volume 71, Issue 3, 23 January 2020, pp 749–750.

[26] The exhibition catalogue for *SEA STATE 9: proclamation garden* has also attempted to query this binary of native and non-native (exotic) by swapping it out for "local" and "migrant", not as a substitute classification, but to draw attention to the terminological slippage.

[27] Janet Marinelli, "As World Warms, How Do We Decide When a Plant is Native?", *Yale Environment 360*, 19 April 2016, [https://e360.yale.edu/features/how\\_do\\_we\\_decide\\_when\\_a\\_plant\\_is\\_native\\_climate\\_change](https://e360.yale.edu/features/how_do_we_decide_when_a_plant_is_native_climate_change), accessed 8 March 2021.

[28] One important work to note as a formal cross reference is Singapore-born, Malaysia-raised, Australian artist Simryn Gill's black and white photo series *Forest* (1996-98) which had streams of texts from books cut up and woven into a chosen landscape and then photographed. See also Kevin Chua, "Simryn Gill and Migration's Capital", *Art Journal*, Vol. 61, No. 4 (Winter, 2002), pp. 4-21 for Chua's relating of *Forest* to aspects of foreignness, etymological and human movements, and global capital.

[29] *1001 Garden Plants in Singapore*, ed. Boo Chih Min, Kartini Omar-Hor and Ou-Yang Chow Lin, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (Singapore: National Parks Board, 2003), vi. And as previously mentioned, the legislative history of the Foreshores Act and the lot numbering of our land proclamations are also not as clear-cut and straightforward; if one looks at it closely, you too will notice unexplained shifts and uncorrected discrepancies.

[30] Joshua Comaroff and Ong Ker-Shing, *Paramilitary gardening. Landscape and authoritarianism* (Netherlands: Lekker, 2008).

[31] George Yeo, Interview with Minister of Information and the Arts BG (NS) George Yeo, *Karyawan*, Jan–Apr 1999.

[32] See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi, (London and New York: Continuum, 2004).

[33] Carmen Nge, "Vestiges of an Artist", essay for the exhibition "Wong Hoy Cheong: On Unlearning and Relearning", 17 February – 17 March 2017, <http://www.ourartprojects.com/exhibitions-essay.php?id=19>, accessed 8 March 2021.

[34] The work was part of the group exhibition "Warbox, Lalang, Killing Tools", a show by artists Bayu Utomo Radjikin, Raja Shariman Raja Aziddin and Wong Hoy Cheong, to celebrate the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Five Arts Centre, a multidisciplinary collective of Malaysian artists and creatives.

[35] See Ooi Kok Chuen, *New Straits Times*, 3 September 1994 and J. Anu, "Tribute to a resilient weed", *Sunday Star*, 16 October 1994.

[36] Donald Moore and Joanna Moore. *The First 150 Years of Singapore* (Singapore: Donald Moore Press, 1969).

[37] Situationists were avant-garde artists, intellectuals, and political theorists who came together to form a revolutionary international organisation called Situationist International (SI) that was active from 1957 to 1972. One of their key ideas, promulgated by Guy Debord, is *détournement*. This is a tactic of subversion or hijacking so that something familiar may be reworked to contain an antithetical message instead.

**Adele Tan** received her PhD in art history from The Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London and is currently Senior Curator at National Gallery Singapore. Her recent curatorial projects include the exhibition *Awakenings: Art in Society in Asia, 1960s to 1990s* (2018-2019), the inaugural Bangkok Art Biennale in 2018, and *OUTBOUND*, a series of large-scale site-specific artwork commissions at the Gallery (ongoing). She also lectures in the Art History Minor programme at the National University of Singapore. She is presently preparing monographic exhibitions on the artists Lin Hsin Hsin, Kim Lim and Teo Eng Seng.



**Sutthirat  
Supaparinya**

*When Need Moves the Earth*, synchronized 3-channel video, 2014. © Sutthirat Supaparinya

## Tracing ecological histories of the Mekong

*This interview with Chiang Mai based multi-media artist Sutthirat Supaparinya discusses her practice, focusing in particular on her “electricity generation series” that includes My Grandpa’s Route Has Been Forever Blocked (2012), Ten Places in Tokyo (2013), When Need Moves the Earth (2014), Where the Wild Things Are (2016), and A Separation of Sand and Islands (2018). Foregrounding the entanglement of colonial and ecological histories of the Mekong region, Sutthirat’s audio-visual installations often connect present day environmental concerns with the historical legacies of colonial expansionism across the region. Sutthirat discusses her collaborations with local Thai environmental activist groups, geologists and the Earth Observatory of Singapore, and the Thai sound artist Arnont Nongyao.*

interviewer **Philippa Lovatt**

interviewee **Sutthirat Supaparinya**

Chiang Mai based, multi-media, artist Sutthirat Supaparinya's body of work spans video, installation, sculpture, and photography. Her video work has explored the impact of infrastructural development on local ecosystems in the Mekong region as part of a wider series about energy generation that has also included works made in Japan and New Zealand. Taken as a whole, the "electricity generation series" presents a critique of the development of energy infrastructures that, while recognising the need for "cleaner" electricity in the region, draws attention to the ecological damage such structures cause and to interrelated issues of social justice. Throughout her work, Sutthirat's political and infrastructural critique is subtle rather than didactic, whether she is revealing a series of unusable bus stops in the city of Chiang Mai that were never intended for passengers, in *Unintentionally Waiting* (2017), or the use of nuclear energy for electricity generation in Tokyo after the 2011 Fukushima disaster, in the more abstract *Ten Places in Tokyo* (2016). There is instead an openness to her approach that stems from her use of observational documentary in which the camera patiently records situations as they unfold and locations reveal their stories to her. The more experimental aspects of her work also demonstrate an interest in the expressive potential of duration, abstraction, and location sound recording, and reveal an attunement to the phenomenology of place.

Sutthirat's practice involves extensive research, which she has carried out across the region in Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Myanmar, where she has investigated contemporary experiences of infrastructural development, and in particular, the construction of hydroelectricity dams. The multi-channel video and sound installations, *My Grandpa's Route Has Been Forever Blocked* (2012), *When Need Moves the Earth* (2014), and *A Separation of Sand and Islands* (2018), address how dams impact upon local ways of life that are intimately connected to the environment and how the land and riverscapes affected have been dramatically and irrevocably altered by human activity. The installations foreground the entanglement of colonial and ecological histories of the Mekong region as Sutthirat connects present-day environmental concerns with the historical legacies of colonial expansionism. In particular, tracing histories of French colonial trade and exploration alongside contemporary political and economic issues, such as the impact of foreign investment on this area, Sutthirat's work suggests that when it comes to the exploitation of natural resources, history repeats itself. Just as in the colonial era, cultures, rituals, and local cosmologies are swept away alongside communities when they become part of the "submersion zone".<sup>1</sup> As Rob Nixon describes, "When a megadam obliterates a flood plain whose ebb and flow has shaped the agricultural, fishing, fruit and nut harvesting—and hence nutritional-rhythms of a community, it also drowns the past: the submergence zone swallows place-based connections to the dead, the dead as living presences who move among past, present, and future, animating time with connective meaning".<sup>2</sup>

*My Grandpa's Route Has Been Forever Blocked* focusses on Thailand's Ping River, a historical trade route that was blocked by the Bhumibol Dam in 1958. The Ping River has a long Siamese-European history as a route for exporting teakwood but also plays an important part of Sutthirat's family history because her grandparents lived and worked along the Ping River in Lamphun Province until their village was relocated after the construction of the dam. On her mother's side, Sutthirat's grandfather was a manager for a timber transportation company that used the Ping River to move teakwood from Chiang Mai to Bangkok, from where it was then exported to Europe. Sutthirat has described how he would often be away working for long stretches of time and that his job was both physically demanding and dangerous as he had to handle elephants and heavy logs, while watching for bandits and safely navigating the boat between crags and cliffs.<sup>3</sup>

In making the work, Sutthirat attempted to follow the same route as her grandfather but at one part it became impossible as the route now led to the Bhumibol Dam where the Ping River had swelled to become a lake, submerging villages and teak forests in the process. One video channel features footage tak-



**Sutthirat  
Supaparinya**

Top: *My Grandpa's Route  
Has Been Forever Blocked*,  
synchronized 2-channel  
video, 2012

Below: installation shot  
©Sutthirat Supaparinya

en from onboard the ferry on the lake while the other shows the thirteen weirs and floodgates, and the enormous concrete dam, as the film follows the route from the first weir near the origin of the river at Mae Faek Weir, Mae Tang, Chiang Mai to the end of the journey at the dam. Anxieties over the threat of environmental catastrophe are expressed through casual conversation between the ferryman and a passenger when they briefly discuss their fears over what would happen if the dam were to collapse (as recently happened with the Saddle Dam D disaster in Laos in 2018).<sup>4</sup>

*When Need Moves the Earth* (2014) addresses resource extractivism and large-scale electricity production at Thailand's Srinakarin Dam site and the (now decommissioned) Mae Moh Lignite coal mine.<sup>5</sup> In this case, the dam is located in an area of active seismic faults, which increases the risk of earthquakes in the area. *When Need Moves the Earth* juxtaposes contemporary footage of the dam and the mine with black and white and sepia toned archival photographs alongside aerial shots taken from so far above the ground that they resemble abstract paintings. These images unfold against a soundscape of electromagnetic waves and crackles of varying frequencies and intensities that were 'recorded on location by Sutthirat alongside audio she recorded with Thai sound artist Arnont Nongyao in Chiang Mai City. For this purpose, Arnont (who was also responsible for the sound design of the final video) built microphones. Heightened in the mix, this sonic "interference" contrasts with the other ambient sounds of the location, mostly bird calls and the rushing sounds of the water's movement as if to reveal the hidden energies of that environment—to make audible the stress placed on these fault lines and the wider ecology by human activity.

*A Separation of Sand and Islands* (2018) was filmed in Chiang Rai Province in Thailand, Si Phan Don, Champasak Province in Laos, and Sopheakmit Waterfall in Preah Vihear Province, Cambodia. The project was inspired by environmental activists from Chiang Rai who won their protest against China's economic expansion through a proposed trade route on the Mekong between northern Thailand and Laos in December 2017.<sup>6</sup> Filmed along the border between Laos and Thailand, the work connects the colonial and ecological histories of the region with the contemporary experience of China's economic dominance through its investment in the construction of hydroelectricity dams and its attempts to cause further destruction to the land and riverscape in the lower Mekong in order to facilitate the transportation of goods.<sup>7</sup> Like *My Grandpa's Route Has Been Forever Blocked*, *A Separation of Sand and Islands* traces an earlier journey as it follows the route of 19th-century French explorers using Louis Delaporte and Francis Garnier's *A Pictorial Journey on the Mekong: Cambodia, Laos and Yunnan (1866-1868)* as a guide. Part of "The Mekong Exploration Commission report", this text was put together by French officers on behalf of the French colonial authorities and provided documentation for an expedition across the Mekong region. Fore-shadowing the situation with China that led to the protests, the purpose of the French expedition was primarily to find ways of connecting the Mekong delta with the port of Saigon in order to transport goods from northern Siam and southern China.<sup>8</sup>

Sutthirat's river installations remind us that environmental crises are often shaped by economic and political interests that emanate from centres of power operating at a significant distance from the site of harm. This is most apparent when the infrastructural developments have been funded and organised by external powers, such as with the many dam projects in the Mekong region that have been funded by foreign investment. These projects have often involved poorer countries such as Laos (with aspirations to become "the battery of Southeast Asia") taking on huge debt to more economically powerful countries like China.<sup>9</sup> The implicit critique at the heart of Sutthirat's energy series thus suggests that there must always be some form of negotiation between the social benefits that this kind of capital investment can bring to communities and an awareness of the potential long term damage that it will do, and has already

.....  
**Sutthirat's river installations remind us that environmental crises are often shaped by economic and political interests that emanate from centres of power operating at a significant distance from the site of harm.**  
 .....

done, to the human and non-human lives that depend on these fragile ecosystems for survival.

Through their open ended structure and use of durational temporality, the videos' aesthetics evoke the phenomenology of the river and thus a temporality and spatiality of geological scale. However, by tracing how the political and economic systems of the present map onto those of the colonial era across these land and riverscapes, Sutthirat's installations also attend to what Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing et al refer to as "the structural synchronicities between ecology, capital, and the human and more-than-human histories through which uneven landscapes are made and remade".<sup>10</sup> In Sutthirat's installations, there are no voiceovers or talking heads to explain the significance of her footage. Instead, the work invites audiences to make connections between the contemporary and the historical experience of the changing environment through associations that emerge from the placement of sounds and images recorded in different locations and times that form layers in the work, like strata in the sedimentary rocks that rest on the riverbeds, far below the water's surface.

I met with Sutthirat in Chiang Mai in February 2020, when we talked about her approach to her work as an artist and an organiser with Chiang Mai Art Conversation.<sup>11</sup> We continued that conversation a couple of months later via email exchange. I'd like to thank Sutthirat for her generosity in sharing her work and ideas with me.

**Philippa Lovatt:** So many of your works are about place. Could we start by talking about where you're from?

**Sutthirat Supaparinya:** I was born in Chiang Mai, but actually I grew up in another city about 30km away called Lamphun city, which is much older than Chiang Mai. The village I'm from, the people from there built up Chiang Mai, so that's why it's a lot older. I grew up in a very small village which had a beautiful landscape near the [Ping and Kwong] river... It was still in the city, but it was really easy to enjoy the environment because everything was so close. So as a young kid, I enjoyed the environment around me—in my free time, just playing outside, running around outdoors. That kind of memory has stayed with me and I can see the landscape has changed very quickly since my childhood until recent times. It's very quick, which is quite different from my grandparents' and my parents' time which is quite slow—how things changed was very slow... When I traveled around the city in Chiang Mai with my mother, she would explain to me about the old days when she was young or even the time when my grandparents lived around Chiang Mai. But I cannot see that anymore—what she described is not what I can see. In one of my early documentaries [*Time-Lapse City*, 2006], I interviewed old people about what they remembered about the changes they have noticed in their lifetime... That documentary gave me a lot of information and inspiration... and I'm still very interested in the issues related to that project because of the memories and knowledge that the old people I met gave to me.

**PL:** Your artistic practice is often described in writing about your work as "questioning and interpreting public information" in a way that draws attention to the impact of human activities on other humans and the landscape. How did you first become interested in the connection between human activity and the environment?

**SS:** When I was researching the Ping River, which was a main transportation route from the north to Bangkok in my grandparents' time, I found a large hydroelectricity dam sitting in the middle of the route. Once I visited the dam site,



**Sutthirat Supaparinya**

*A Separation of Sand and Islands*, synchronized 2-channel video, 2018

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it made me recall that my grandpa's family relocated their village because of being flooded by the dam, to a new home prepared by government.

**PL:** When we met, you also talked about the Mekong River and the need for those countries connected to it to address the many problems that this fragile ecosystem faces as a result of economic decision-making by governments and investors. How would you describe the role of artists and filmmakers in highlighting these issues?

**SS:** They can help to document landscapes that may not restore, put across various information about the area, voice what is missing, and put across both the small and big picture of the impact. I think that artists hope that their role can be to drive the changing behaviour of humans.

**PL:** Your research process involves tracing histories of colonialism and its impact on the ecologies of the Mekong alongside contemporary political and economic concerns. Your "electricity generation" series (which includes the two-channel video installation filmed in New Zealand, *Where the Wild Things Are*, 2016) is very interesting to me in the ways that it attempts to connect these histories with contemporary geopolitics. Your video work *When Need Moves The Earth* (2014) for example, depicts two sites used to generate electricity in northern Thailand: an active coal mine and dam. I read that this was a collaboration with the Earth Observatory of Singapore and you worked closely with a geologist, Dr. Sarawute Chantraprasert (Lecturer at Department of Geological Sciences, Chiang Mai University) for the project. How did that project come about?

**SS:** After making *My Grandpa's Route Has Been Forever Blocked*, I became interested in exploring how the consumption of electricity was part of the problem (when I made *Ten Places in Tokyo*, 2013) and at the same time, with *When Need Moves The Earth*, I wanted to show how the electricity was produced. I chose 2 large-scale electricity generations that sat on active fault lines. It is sensitive to the earth and could potentially create a man-made earthquake. This work allowed the audience to see the source of the problem, which was far away from the city. Because of the distance most of people in the city didn't know about the impact on the rural environment.

**PL:** What did the research process involve and what did you learn through the project, not only about the specific environmental issues but also about what is important to you as an artist?

And what do you think you and the geologist learnt from each other?

**SS:** I learned about the importance of the work of geologists and geography when humans search for a site to build energy infrastructures or mines, particularly the need to consider if there is an active fault line in the area. I also learned from the geologist how to observe the earth and use "google earth" as a research tool. They explained to me the sign of the active-fault line typography and how they use GPS and satellite to monitor the movements of the earth. It can also forecast the coming of an earthquake. What they learned from me perhaps how I presented my idea in the form of the visual arts.

**PL:** What were the parallels and differences you noticed between researching and filming on location in Asia and New Zealand for this series?

**SS:** Before I produced the work in New Zealand, I paused my project related to energy for some years. I had a big question about whether renewable energy is a better solution or another evil. With the nature of the strong winds in Wellington, it makes sense to harness that wind power to transform it into energy. The wind energy turbines are everywhere, small to large. I felt less negative towards electricity generation there. Also, because New Zealand is so careful about the disturbance of their activity to the environment. However, I still question *Where the Wild Things Are* in my mind. I'm still not sure if the renewable/green energy is right for us to feel less guilty and use this as an excuse to consume energy more freely than ever.

**PL:** *My Grandpa's Route Has Been Forever Blocked* (2012) records the infrastructural change in Thailand's Ping River, a historical trade route blocked by the Bhumibol Dam in 1958. This work was part of the "Riverscapes in Flux" – an international eco-cultural art project on the river landscapes of Southeast Asia that was co-ordinated by the Goethe-Institut that featured curators and artists from Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar, Indonesia, and the Philippines working across installations, photo series, video and sound installations.<sup>12</sup> The title of the work suggests that your own family history was really important for this project. Why was this important to you?

**SS:** Because the inspiration for the project came from my curiosity about my grandpa's life who traded by transporting goods via the Ping River.

**PL:** Can you explain how you went about researching this project?

**SS:** First, I went to the dam site because I'd heard about it but had never seen it. There I took an overnight ferry from the dam site to the lake area which is near to where my grandpa's relative lives. On the ferry trip, I was able to observe how the river had been transformed into an enormous lake and see what remained

of the old life below the water. I wanted to see the other structures along the river too and so afterwards, I visited all the dikes, water gates, and anything that blocked the waterway.

**PL:** With the “Riverscapes in Flux” project, what kinds of connections did you see in the other works from different Southeast Asian countries?

**SS:** In the other works in the project, I saw the decrease in fish populations in rivers by an artist who collected traditional fish traps that have now become rare items (*Jedsada Tangtrakulwong, Spirits under the Chi River*, 2013). I saw the production of fish as an industry (*Thảo Nguyễn Phan, Mekong Mechanical*, 2012), while in some countries the quality of water was not good enough for living things. When authorities say that a dam won't affect the number of fish, it's not reliable.

**PL:** Do you think that it's important that environmental histories and issues should be considered from a regional perspective?

**SS:** Yes, I think so. Those who live in the area should be able to be included and have some say in the planning of infrastructural projects that will affect their environment before and during the implementation of them.

**PL:** Your work as both an artist and an organiser (with Chiang Mai Art Conversation) has involved collaboration with local environmental activist groups and communities, and traces ecological histories that go above and beyond national borders. An example of this is *A Separation of Sand and Islands*, which was filmed in Chiang Rai Province in Thailand, Si Phan Don, Champasak Province in Laos and Sopheakmit Waterfall in Preah Vihear Province, Cambodia. I read that this project was inspired by Thai environmental activists from Chiang Rai who won their protest against China's economic expansion through a trade route on the Mekong between northern Thailand and Laos in December 2017. The installation was first shown at the 12<sup>th</sup> Gwangju Biennale in South Korea in 2018 as part of the exhibition *Facing Phantom Borders* and it explores the local ecosystems of the river in close detail, paying attention to rocks, islets, and the rare birds that inhabit them. At the other end of the scale, the work also documents the international trade routes that cut through it. Where did the idea come from for that project and in what ways is it a continuation of previous themes in your work?

**SS:** The idea came from my trip to Chiang Rai (Northern Thailand) to visit sites and meet with activists who stopped the Chinese attempt to demolish the rocks and islets on the river to make way for larger ships to pass through. There I also got introduced to a book called *A Pictorial Journey on the Mekong: Cambodia, Laos, and Yunnan* by Louis Delaporte and Francis Garnier, which led me to visit the other sites of the rocky area on the Mekong River in southern Laos. *A Separation of Sand and Island* is different from *My Grandpa's Route Has Been Forever Blocked* in the way that it documents the riverscape in Chiang Rai before the big changes happen. In this work, I also compared the site with other islets in the southern parts of the river where French Indochina had built infrastructure about 100 years ago on the islands and river in order to travel to the north. Again, there was another hydroelectricity dam under construction that local people believed would change their life and the precious nature there forever. So, I went there to cover what was it was like before the operation of the dam and how the landscape had already been transformed in the colonial era to allow the French to travel through these 4,000 islands.

**PL:** How did you come to be involved in the *Facing Phantom Borders* exhibition?

**SS:** I was invited by the curator, Gridthiya Gaweewong, to join the show, since



**Sutthirat Supaparinya**

*A Separation of Sand and Islands*, synchronized 2-channel video, 2018 ©Sutthirat Supaparinya

she had followed this project and played a major role in helping me to complete it. Gridthiya's home town is at the Khong River, where I shot the video.

**PL:** How did you first learn of the campaign group's environmental activism and in what ways do you think that this connection with them influenced your approach (for this work and for thinking about future projects)?

**SS:** I learned about the issue from the news and I had followed the story for a few years before I told myself that I can't wait to produce some work about it. The timing was important because, I felt that if I didn't start when I did, I wouldn't be able to be a witness and document the area before the big changes came. So, I spent my own budget on research and shooting first and looked for financial support to complete the post-production later.

**PL:** This particular installation foregrounds transnational connections between Laos, Thailand, and northern Cambodia due to their proximity to the river. I read about how the work revisits the colonial history of the Mekong when the French colonial powers surveyed and constructed transport infrastructures along the river and the Khone islands. In her curatorial introduction to *A Separation of Sand and Island*, Gridthiya describes how your work connects the colonial past with China's shipping expansion plans, which involve destroying large sections of islets and reefs between Northern Thailand and Laos in order to “invent a new Silk Route to Europe through Singapore.” How do you see the current economic and political situation impacting the ecosystems of the Mekong and the communities that live there?



**Sutthirat Supaparinya**

*A Separation of Sand and Islands, synchronized 2-channel video, 2018 ©Sutthirat Supaparinya*

**SS:** In the Khone islands, in southern Laos, the hydroelectricity dam has changed people's life hugely. Since the people here have depended on traditional fishing for their food and livelihoods, the dam project has decreased the number of fishes because it has stopped the fish from being able to travel to Tonle Sap in Cambodia to lay their eggs. The traditional wood structure fish traps that used to be built on the waterfalls were not allowed to be built after the dam started to operate. Also, the electricity produced by the dam was used to create a new Chinese zone in the area. While along the border of northern Thailand and Laos, the river level goes up and down and is controlled by the Chinese dam from both the upper and lower stream. This effects the people, animals, and plants on the river as its flow is no longer seasonal. Last year, after one new dam operated, the colour of the river changed from brown to blue because the dam stopped the sediment, which comes from the plants and other living things that are part of that ecosystem. The area along the river has been developed hugely for international trading.

**PL:** What recurring themes or shared concerns do you notice in Southeast Asian artists' responses, or artists' responses from the global south more broadly, to the environmental crisis?

**SS:** That nature has been interrupted and changed by large-scale development projects. That the lives of local people and communities have been affected badly because of their lack of rights. Artists are aware of the change of the environment and the traditional customs that are connected to it—the attempts to conserve the environment and people's well-being presents a big contrast to

the emphasis on new development, which puts income first.

**PL:** How would you describe the relationship between "official" sources of information and local communities with regards to environmental awareness and activism in Thailand?

**SS:** Official sources of information are somehow carefully controlled when it can damage the reputation of the government, an organisation or a person. While local communities who are directly affected by the environment reflect the reality of what they experience in daily life.

**PL:** *A Separation of Sand and Island* follows the French explorers of the 19th century. Can you tell me about your interest in colonial histories of the region? When did you first start to research these histories?

**SS:** Niwat Roykaew, a leader of the community who fought to conserve the river introduced me to the book [*A Pictorial Journey on the Mekong: Cambodia, Laos, and Yunnan*] and it led me to extend my travel to southern Laos. I became interested in the history of the region after I returned to Thailand from studying in Germany where I felt I didn't know my roots enough. At the time in 2002, after all the conflict between us, people in the region didn't trust or know each other well. It was an eye-opening time for me to explore the area. Their scenes were exotic and exciting for me, but our roots are so close and it's easy to understand each other even though we speak different languages. It was a big contrast to me living in Europe. The region in my view is one unseparated area of shared history, culture, and environment. The border conflicts interest me since these were important in the eyes of the rulers, and then the commoners. The colonisers were only interested in the landscape for how they could gain the most profit through making use of strategic locations and through the trade of products.

**PL:** In a lot of environmentally engaged artists' moving image from Southeast Asia, the entanglement of colonial and ecological histories is often a central theme. In what ways do you see colonial and ecological histories of the Mekong being connected?

**SS:** The colonial became a role model for local government or industry to follow the same strategy to gain profit of the nature and people.

**PL:** When I asked you about *A Separation of Sand and Island* and *My Grandpa's Route Has Been Forever Blocked* before you mentioned that you wanted to capture the movement of the river because you could see that with the impact of dams, these natural rhythms will likely soon disappear. Do you see your video works as being connected in a way that documents a process of change over a longer period of time, particularly with regards to environmental change, than would be possible in a single artwork?

**SS:** Yes, the installation form I find works well to allow the audience to be immersed and surrounded with different perspectives of the place that I want them to experience. With that form, I feel that the wider space of the installation allows audiences to freely move around their body and eyes.

**PL:** Can you talk about the medium specificity of the works—your practice involves lots of different media, but you work in video a lot. What do you like about working with video?



**Sutthirat Supparinya**

*Ten Places in Tokyo*, synchronized 10-channel video, 2016 © Sutthirat Supparinya

**SS:** I like the role of the video that can document the situation. It also produces fewer objects or trash. It's easy to carry to places in terms of production and exhibition. The post-production process requires less space, which helps me to stay still and concentrate.

**PL:** Questions of space (both urban and rural) are obviously very important for your work, but how important are questions of time and duration?

**SS:** Sound, movement, time and duration are important in terms of capturing the situation with a sense of being there to observe something. Sound in some of my works conveys the existing sound on the site. However, some works convey the situation/ perception in my mind in terms of how I comprehend the subjects. I often use sound that we don't hear but that exists at the site.

**PL:** That's very interesting and seems to connect with how you tend to exhibit your work, as installations rather than single-screen films shown in cinema spaces. I'm curious about your influences — are there experimental or artist filmmakers whose work has inspired you or that you particularly like?

**SS:** I'm from an art background and so I feel that installation can express my ideas in a fuller form. While working with video, the influence of video art, experimental film, and documentary film has also been important—for example, artists and filmmakers who use political poetic action such as Francis Alÿs or experimental techniques to create their work and installations such as Olafur Eliasson, Carsten Nicolai, Diana Thater, and Ryoji Ikeda. I have also been influenced by filmmakers who use non-narrative, long shots or mysterious stories such as David Lynch, Abbas Kiarostami, Rûken Tekeş, and other filmmakers—who work often without narrative—just on-site shooting and field recording. In contradiction, some of my early documentaries used a lot of talking-head interviews such as in *Omkoï District, Pa-an Village* (2004), *Taste of Noodles* (2006), and *Time-lapse City* (2006), which were influenced by my time working with a research unit (Unit of Social and Environmental Research) and the Mekong region journalist workshop (*Imaging Our Mekong*, 2005).

**PL:** Another of your installations that I'm really fascinated by that links with the theme of energy generation is *Ten Places in Tokyo* (2013) in which you show video footage of ten locations in Tokyo that are reported to use the highest amount of electricity in the city, which is still sourced from nuclear energy even after the 2011 Fukushima disaster.

I saw a talk you gave at Sa Sa Arts Projects in Phnom Penh where you explained how the use of black and white video was to mimic the effect of nuclear explosions, which destroy darker material more rapidly than light, and how you used different colour charts that were connected with the destruction caused by the nuclear bomb. Can you explain in more detail about your uses of black and white/colour for this installation?

**SS:** I chose to use black and white images in this work following my research at The Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum in Japan. There I saw that most of the evidence of the atomic bomb was in black and white such as kimonos, black ink texts on white papers, and images of burned shadow. Heat rays of approximately 5,000°-Celsius produced by the atomic blast burned away dark or black coloured parts of objects because they absorbed more heat. This effect shocked me and inspired me to do more research about nuclear history. In my work, I used the effect of the atomic bomb in destroying the darkest part of the images first and continue to destroy the dark colour of the images until they form a loose quality of the black, grey, and white. The bright white across the ten screens at once also depicts the bright flash of the atomic bomb against the sky when it exploded.



**Sutthirat Supaparinya**

*Ten Places in Tokyo*, synchronized 10-channel video, 2018 ©Sutthirat Supaparinya

**PL:** This project seems to have a particularly strong connection with the new work you mentioned last time about the history of World War II in Southeast Asia. You said that with this work, you wanted to draw attention to the enormous impact that the war had on the environment across the region. In writing about the contemporary ecological crisis, researchers have described World War II (the dropping of the atomic bomb) and the Cold War (especially the dropping of Agent Orange over Vietnam and parts of its neighboring countries in Southeast Asia) as the beginning of the “great acceleration” or the Anthropocene (which has been defined as “the current geological age, viewed as the period during which human activity has been the dominant influence on climate and the environment”). The question of survivability seems really relevant to your work. I find it very interesting that you don't necessarily take an overly critical position on power generation for example, as you acknowledge that we are all consumers and as such must take a share of responsibility. I'm very curious about how this theme seems to run through a lot of your work. Do you see your videos as responding to particular environmental/historical moments that ask us to pay attention to these kinds of questions of vulnerability and survivability in the Anthropocene (or something like that!)?

**SS:** My work is more about how to raise awareness that we went too far and too fast in creating the Anthropocene. We consume too fast and somehow unnecessarily. We can slow down and create what is basically enough for us, but not for a large-scale industry or far away future—since the speed of consumption will hurt the environment, other living things, and ourselves—it's too fast for us to be able to rehabilitate in a short period

of time. We have rapidly spent what nature took so much time to produce.

**PL:** When we talked last time you also mentioned that you were inspired by the work of a Japanese photographer who moved from Japan to Hawaii, to Bangkok and how his movement across those cities relates to his practice. Can you tell me more about who that was and what interested you about his work?

**SS:** His name is Morinosuke Tanaka. He helped the Japanese Army to survey the landscape and routes from Chiang Mai to Myanmar, and I'm interested in what kind of images he took for his research and life in the transition time.<sup>13</sup>

**PL:** How did you first become interested in this topic?

**SS:** I became interested when I interviewed five elderly people who lived in Chiang Mai. They lived in the time Mr. Tanaka was alive and they shared some of his experiences. Mr. Tanaka took some important images of the time.

**PL:** You mentioned in our last conversation that you interviewed a lot of elderly people in Chiang Mai about their memories of that time (during and after World War II), how important are personal stories and memories for your work in terms of how you depict environmental change?

**SS:** Firstly, it's important to know what my grandparents and their generation experienced in the layers of the same landscape I live in now. I see and live differently in this landscape with respect and appreciation of places, buildings and an awareness of time and uncertainty. In another layer of the project, I feel that we must know our history and roots from our family or community's narrative, which seems quite rare sometimes. We should know also the dark side of the history of the city we live in.

**PL:** What other archival material have you found and how do you approach this material?

**SS:** I found more online stories from the Chiang Mai residents, and compared stories of the war from the other countries, and collected some occupation banknotes, photographs, and war amulets. The more I found, the more I could piece together the jigsaw and think about which items to use for future projects.

**PL:** What have you learned through your research about the ways in which the war impacted the landscape in Chiang Mai and across the region?

**SS:** Some areas became a sensitive location that was occupied by Thai military. Some routes and bridges continued to be developed for public. Some villages had changed for the use of the war and the villagers relocated themselves elsewhere. Many people who lived in the city, escaped to stay in the suburbs and some settle there. People were moving around a lot. During the war, it was the time of discovering new possibilities of places. After the war, some foreigners returned for some reason (trading, living, or to trace the history) which created the new meanings of these places and routes.

## Endnotes

- [1] See Andrew Alan Johnson, *Mekong Dreaming: Life and Death Along a Changing River* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020).
- [2] Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 162.
- [3] Sutthirat Supaparinya, 'My Grandpa's Route has Been Forever Blocked,' RiverScapes Blog, Goethe Institut, March 17, 2013. <https://blog.goethe.de/riverscapes/archives/34-My-Grandpas-Route-Has-Been-Forever-Blocked-Sutthirat-Supaparinya.html>. See also 'Artist talk by Sutthirat Som Supaparinya,' Sa Sa Art Projects, Phnom Penh, March 30, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/162199477196136/videos/1669374069811995>
- [4] See 'Laos dam collapse: Many feared dead as floods hit villages,' BBC News, 24 July, 2018. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-44935495>
- [5] *When Need Moves the Earth* was shown as part of the exhibition: "Unearthed: The EOS (Earth Observatory of Singapore) Art Projects (2010-2013)" at the Singapore Art Museum in 2014. See [https://earthobservatory.sg/news/exhibition-eos-art-projects-singapore-art-museum#\\_U\\_SXoUgRbPk](https://earthobservatory.sg/news/exhibition-eos-art-projects-singapore-art-museum#_U_SXoUgRbPk). The title of Sutthirat's work was inspired by Francis Alys's *When Faith Moves Mountains* (2002).
- [6] See Tom Fawthrop, 'Thai resistance to China's downstream ambitions,' Asia Times, May 16, 2017, <https://asiatimes.com/2017/05/thai-resistance-chinas-downstream-ambitions/>
- [7] I am reminded here of the Vietnamese artist Phan Thao Nguyen's repurposing of Alexandre de Rhodes' 1653 text *Voyages et Missions du Père Alexandre de Rhodes en La Chinese et Autres Royaumes de l'Orient, avec son Retour en Europe par la Perse et l'Arménie* with regard to the layering of the contemporary images over a historical text (implied but not seen in Sutthirat's work). See Nora A. Taylor, "(Tran)scribed History: Thao Nguyen Phan's Palimpsest Visions of Colonialism and Conversion," *Afterall*, No. 47 (Spring/Summer 2019), <https://www.afterall.org/journal/issue.47/tran-scribed-history-phan-thao-nguyen-s-palimpsest-visions-of-colonialism-and-conversion>
- [8] See John Keay, 'The Mekong Exploration Commission, 1866-68: Anglo-French Rivalry in South East Asia,' *Asian Affairs* 36, no. 3: 289-312. See also François Molle, Tira Foran and Mira Käkönen (eds.), *Contested Waterscapes in the Mekong Region: Hydropower, Livelihoods and Governance* (London and Sterling, VA: Earthscan, 2009).
- [9] Carl Middleton, 'Waters, rivers and dams' in Philip Hirsch (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of the Environment in South-east Asia* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), p. 212. See also Marwaan Macan-Markar, 'Chinese dams ramp up Lao external debt,' *Nikkei Asian Review*, November 2, 2018, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Economy/Chinese-dams-ramp-up-Lao-external-debt>
- [10] Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, Andrew S. Mathews, and Nils Bubandt, 'Patchy Anthropocene: Landscape Structure, Multispecies History, and the Retooling of Anthropology,' *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 60, Supplement 20, August 2019, p. S186.
- [11] See my interview with Sutthirat Supaparinya, Chiang Mai, 27 February, 2020: <https://www.aseac-interviews.org/sutthirat-supaparinya>
- [12] The exhibition featured artworks from 17 artists based in Southeast Asia including Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia working in new media, photography, sound, and video installation. It was an eco-art project initiated by the Goethe Institut in Hanoi in 2012 about the ecological and cultural impact of environmental changes across the region. See "Riverscapes in Flux: Ecological and Cultural Change of Major River Landscapes in Southeast Asia," July 29, 2013, <https://blog.goethe.de/riverscapes/archives/71-Riverscapes-IN-FLUX-Ecological-and-Cultural-Change-of-Major-River-Landscapes-in-Southeast-Asia.html>. See also Nora A. Taylor, "(Tran)scribed History: Thao Nguyen Phan's Palimpsest Visions of Colonialism and Conversion," *Afterall*, No. 47 (Spring/Summer 2019), <https://www.afterall.org/journal/issue.47/tran-scribed-history-phan-thao-nguyen-s-palimpsest-visions-of-colonialism-and-conversion>
- [13] See Hak Hakanson, 'Japan in Northeast Thailand during World War II: Morinosuke Tanaka,' [https://www.lanna-w2.com/pages/z02200-CNX\\_city/y02235%20Tanaka/y02235-001\\_page\\_01.html](https://www.lanna-w2.com/pages/z02200-CNX_city/y02235%20Tanaka/y02235-001_page_01.html)

**Sutthirat Supaparinya** lives and works in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Her works encompass a wide variety of mediums such as installation, objects, still and moving images. Her recent projects focus on history and the impact of human activities on other humans and the landscape. Sutthirat earned a BFA in painting from the Faculty of Fine Arts at Chiang Mai University and a postgraduate diploma in Media Arts from Hochschule Fuer Grafik und Buchkunst in Leipzig, Germany.

**Philippa Lovatt** is a Lecturer in Film Studies at the University of St Andrews, UK. Her research focusses on artists' moving image, eco-cinema, sound, and Southeast Asian independent cinema. She is currently writing a book on the politics of sound and listening in global artists' film and is also working on an oral history project with Jasmine Nadua Trice, entitled: "Parallel Practices: Oral Histories of Southeast Asian Film and Video Cultures, 1997-2022."



marine  
ecologies



## Ghost Island

*The following is a visual essay based on the collective's inclusion in the 2018 Thailand Biennale, Edge of the Wonderland. For this Biennale, the collective engaged with the Urak Lawoi fishing community in Krabi National Park. Through the story of one fisherman, Gung, MAP Office delves into issues of ecological devastation, economic adversity, and state policy.*

text by **MAP Office**  
**[Gutierrez + Portefaix]**

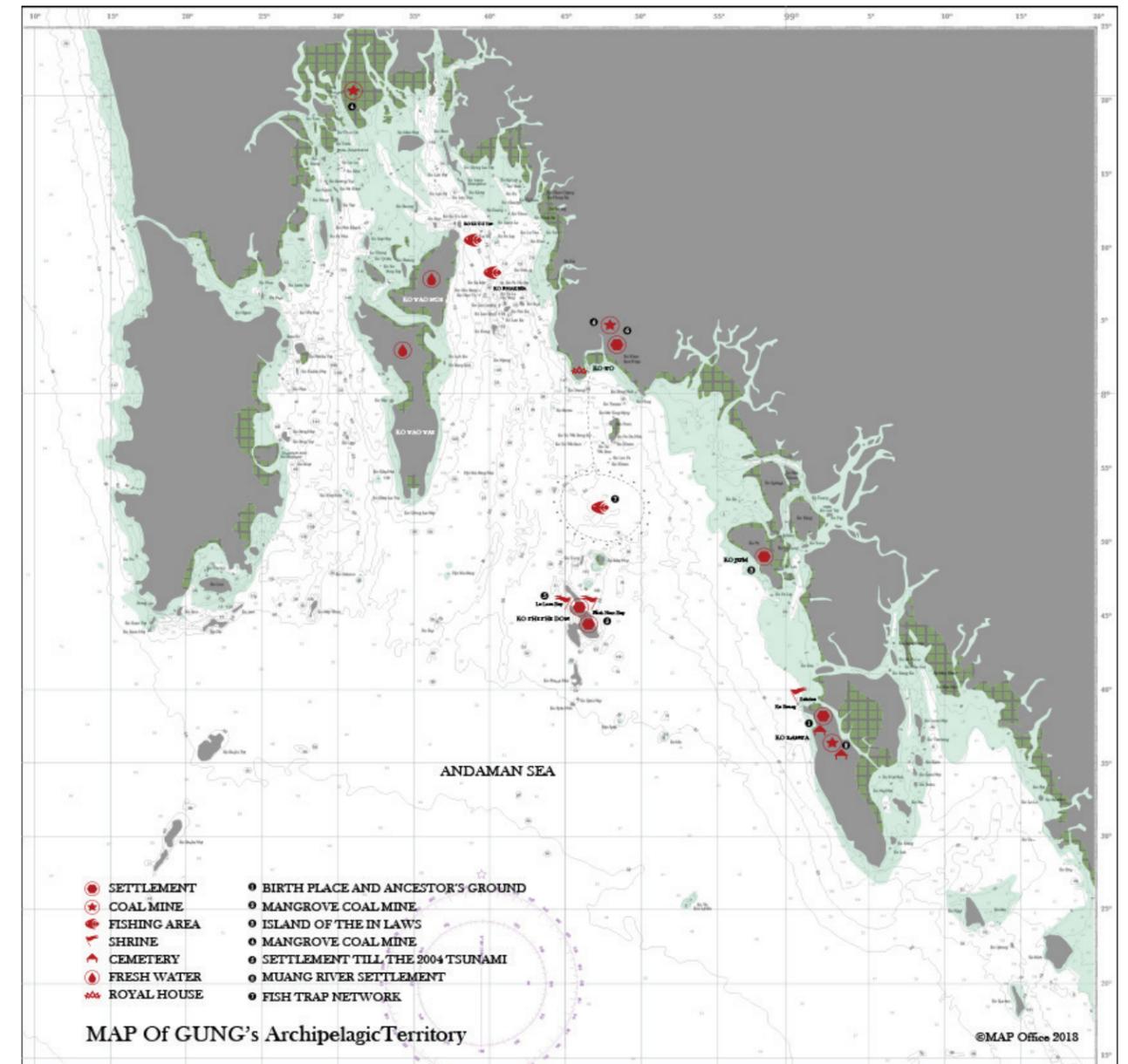
In fall 2017, MAP Office received an invitation from curator Jiang Jiehong to participate in the first Thailand Biennale, “Edge of the Wonderland”. It opened in the province of Krabi in November 2018 and continued for a duration of four months. Facing the Andaman Sea, this southern region is essentially identified for its “take your breath away” landscape of islands, sandy beaches, towering mountains, and the natural wonder of the underwater world. Accompanying such splendours, and contained within the limited area of the National Park, mass tourism is the dominant economic driver of the region, which is now mainly under the control of capitalist liberalism and the power of the nation states. For most visitors, the story of the place is primarily experienced through superficial practices of entertainment and leisure. However, our initial visit immediately pointed out the strong cultural diversity and identity of the area.

Among the communities in Krabi, the *Urak Lawoi* is a fishing community that lives in Krabi National Park and is part of a larger group of “Sea Gypsies”. These communities became our starting point. The project began with our interpretation of the story of one fisherman, Gung. His life has allowed us to trace a contemporary history of the region, especially around a series of federal policies devised to protect the regions’ environment and culture. These policies and events include: the closure of coal mines; the interdiction of blast fishing using dynamite; the establishment of National Parks; the creation of artificial reefs; the imposition of tourists’ fees; fishing regulations; and the Thai Kingdom’s long-lasting protection of minorities. Living in a mangrove along a river, the fisherman Gung and his extended family—about 60 people—occupied this area after the destructive 2004 tsunami. Surviving the disaster, the community flourished over the years with an economy based on fishing and other modes of semi-subsistence related to sea resources. Although they are protected by a “royal recognition” to integrate the community as part of the Thai Kingdom and have been conferred citizenship, the Sea Gypsies continue to remain invisible to the local and tourist population. Surprisingly though, this constitutes their main strength. This, added to their living conditions, hidden in the shadow of the mangrove in-between the land and the sea, frames the group as a “ghost community” which operates at the edge of Thai society.

Continuing the search for the invisible or the hidden through diving with local environmental activists, the exploration of Krabi’s underwater world revealed a large number of fishing nets entrapping the marine life and coral reef. Contrasted with the purity of the crystal clear waters and the strict interdiction of fishing within the park, this devastating form of pollution is a sad spectacle. Invisible killers in the ocean, lost or abandoned fishing nets are too often ignored or not known about by the local or tourist populations. The hypermateriality of the fishing gear identified under the misleading but poetic name of “ghost net”, is now part of the weekly routine of activist divers who dedicate their free time and energy to locate and remove the nets one by one, a Sisyphian undertaking. Although not yet recognised as a serious form of pollution by the authorities, this phenomenon has nonetheless had a huge impact on the ocean, silently and secretly endangering the entire ecosystem – including human beings.

In contrast, the extensive tidal movement is one of the most striking characteristics of Krabi’s coastline. Controlled by the moon, the rise and fall of the sea level directs the timeline of the ecosystems to which both humans and non-humans have to adapt. Crabs, worms, birds, shells, locals, and tourists invade the space leftover by the retracting water and vice-versa. This vibrant and animated landscape of repetition along *Nopparat Thara Beach* appeared to be the perfect site to set up *Ghost Island*, our proposal for the Biennale.

*Ghost Island* is added to the existing archipelagic landscape. Made of bamboo and “ghost nets”, the installation recalls the particular geology of the surrounding islands, which were formed by the accumulation and stratification of numerous distinct layers. Situated one hundred meters away from the shore, the island is de-



**MAP Office**

Map of Gung's Archipelagic Territory, 100 x 100 cm, 2018 @ MAP Office

signed to be appropriated by visitors: walkable at low tide and swimmable at high tide. Its structure is a complex assemblage of bamboo cut from a nearby forest and the accumulation and stratification of 300 kilograms of “ghost nets”.

The new landscape of islands—a total of three—forms a small archipelago that is in dialogue with the original surrounding landscape. The layering of nets repeats the natural color gradation of the vegetation when viewed from the outside, but serves inside as an artificial filter for the light to perforate the island. Collecting energy from the sun during the day, the island is illuminated at night. After the sun-



**MAP Office**

Documentation of Gung's territory, C-Print, Various dim., 2018 @ MAP Office

set, as its sisters become dark shapes, it sparks in the bay and therefore becomes hyper-visible. In just a few days, a proliferation of algae moved by the currents started to use the island as a natural support in which they could grow alongside all the other organic life populating the beach. Impressively, *Ghost Island* found its place in the ecosystem ready for our last project, a fiction in which we invite Gung, the Sea Gypsy to inhabit the island for few days.<sup>2</sup>

Living inside *Ghost Island*, as opposed to living on the island, combines both the ideas of isolation and protection. Learning from Gung's daily routine, the immediate appropriation of the island reveals a symbiosis between Gung and the Island. Gung was the Island and the Island was Gung, both part of a much larger ecosystem in which they contribute with their respective role.

**Endnotes**

[1] *Urak Lawoi* means "brother from the sea" (*urak* = brother and *lawoi* = sea)

[2] Away from a voyeuristic approach, the island serving as a stage was closed to the public view during the video production.

**MAP Office** is a multidisciplinary platform devised by Laurent Gutierrez (1966, Casablanca, Morocco) and Valérie Portefaix (1969, Saint-Étienne, France). This duo of artists has been based in Hong Kong since 1996, working on physical and imaginary territories using varied means of expression. MAP Office projects have been exhibited in over 100 exhibitions at various venues including MoMA (New York), the Guggenheim Museum (New York), the Georges Pompidou Centre (Paris), the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (Beijing), and around 35 Biennales and Triennales around the world. Their cross-disciplinary practice has been the subject of a monograph, *MAP OFFICE - Where the Map is the Territory* (2011). MAP Office was the recipient of the 2013 Sovereign Asian Art Prize.



## Edge of the Wonderland

*Nora Taylor speaks with Thailand Biennale co-curator, Vipash Purichanont. Organized by the Government of Thailand's Ministry of Culture's Office of Contemporary Art and Culture, Thailand's First Biennale Edge of the Wonderland took place from November 2, 2018 until February 28, 2019. Located on the shores of the Andaman Sea in the town of Krabi, the exhibition was staged outdoors, in natural sites, and consisted entirely of site-specific installations.*

interviewee **Vipash Purichanont**

interviewer **Nora Taylor**

**D**r. Vipash Purichanont was a member of the curatorial team along with Dr. Jiang Jiehong and Dr. Vichaya Mukdamanee. Purichanont is an independent curator and a co-founder of Waiting You Curator Lab, a curatorial collective based in Chiang Mai, Thailand. He received a dual-MA in Arts Administration and Policy and an MA in Modern Art History, Theory and Criticism from School of the Art Institute of Chicago and a Ph.D. in Curatorial/Knowledge from the Department of Visual Cultures, Goldsmiths, University of London.

Purichanont's practice has its roots in collaboration. Most of his theoretical work focused on notions of collectivity and community as well as caring and sharing. Although most of Purichanont's curatorial projects are structured around Southeast Asia, his main objective is to initiate a meaningful conversation between the region and the globe. He was an assistant curator for the 1<sup>st</sup> Thailand Biennale Krabi, 2018, and a curator of Singapore Biennale 2019. Purichanont is shortlisted for the ICI Gerritt Lansing Independent Vision Curatorial Award in the same year. He is currently a lecturer at the Department of Art History, Faculty of Archeology, Silpakorn University, Bangkok.

Dr. Nora A. Taylor, Professor of South and Southeast Asian Art interviewed Dr. Purichanont over the course of a month from March to April, 2019.

**Nora Taylor:** *Edge of the Wonderland* was the first international Biennale to be held in Thailand. What is your curatorial background and how you were selected to take part in the Thailand Biennale project?

**Vipash Purichanont:** When I was selected to take part in Thailand Biennale as an assistant curator, the project was at its midpoint, around one and a half years before the opening. At that time, I was in the last year of my Ph.D. course in Curatorial / Knowledge at Goldsmiths, University of London, and I had just come back to Thailand. In the UK, I had some prior experience organizing a project of a similar nature. In 2016, I co-curated *Across the Ocean*, an exhibition that was the core component of the Bournemouth Thai Arts Festival comprised of both Thai and British contemporary artists. I think I was selected partly because of my experience with such a large outdoor exhibition, and partly because of my experience as a Thai working in an international environment.

**NT:** Krabi is an unusual location for a Biennale. It is removed from the capital city of Bangkok and is not a regional art center such as Chiang Mai. How was it chosen for the Biennale?

**VP:** Krabi was already designated as a location for the Biennale before I came in. There were several factors that made the Office of Contemporary Art and Culture (OCAC) the organizer select Krabi. From the beginning, curatorially speaking, Professor Jiang Jiehong, the lead curator, expressed his interest in curating a biennale that was entirely outdoors, site-specific, and engaged with natural sites. It was quite ambitious. Responding to such a framework, OCAC chose Krabi as the location for the biennale because, firstly, it has an excellent variety of natural sites, such as rainforests, waterfalls, mangrove forests, beaches, and islands. There was already a well-protected and very established system of natural parks and a network of community forests. Secondly, OCAC thought that Krabi province was ready to host such an exhibition because the local governments already had experience with contemporary art in that they had the proper infrastructures. The Municipality of Krabi had been commissioning public sculptures for decades. The Mayor also founded the Andaman Cultural Center, which holds a collection of local artefacts, and the area hosts a group of local artists and architects. Thirdly, there were already several cultural policies implemented in the province before



**Takafumi Fukasawa**

*Football Field for Buffalo*, 2018. Courtesy of the Office of Contemporary Art and Culture, Ministry of Culture

@ Takafumi Fukasawa

the biennale. Krabi is one of three pilot cities in the Ministry of Culture's nationwide plan to create "art cities," which should be seen as an attempt to create creative cities, because Thailand, at that point, realized that its tourism industry had consumed its natural resources. The central government supported a creative industry and entrepreneurial system that would add value to the economy beyond natural tourism. The biennale was seen as a cultural venture to use art in bridging nature with creativity and revitalizing the tourist industry.

**NT:** What were some of the advantages and challenges of the location itself?

**VP:** The major advantage of this biennale was that it was run by the main organization of the central government (OCAC) and co-produced by the local government bodies (provincial government, municipality, subdistrict administrations, and so on...). In this respect, I think we had a huge advantage in working with authorities and permissions. In the beginning, when we did our curatorial survey, it seemed like every door was open for us. It was unimaginable to be able to curate an outdoor exhibition in such a beautiful landscape that is Krabi. Of course, I knew that the situation was too good to be true. The reality kicked in when we invited the first group of artists to do a site survey, and they experimented with

**Valentina Karga**

Previous page: *Coming Community*, 2018. Courtesy of the Office of Contemporary Art and Culture, Ministry of Culture  
@ Valentina Karga



**MAP Office**

*Ghost Island*, 2018. Courtesy of the Office of Contemporary Art and Culture, Ministry of Culture @ Map Office

their ideas. The curatorial team, especially our on-site coordinators, were asked to pay a visit to local authorities every day to see which organization was responsible for granting what permission. At one point, we realized that there was an anxiety that had gradually grown among the organizers, the ministry, the municipality, and the national parks; we were asked indirectly several times to show the sketches from the artists. Eventually, we learned that our perception of contemporary art differed greatly from that of the administration and the sponsors. They thought the biennale was a sculpture festival where each artist would come to Krabi to get inspired and make a sculpture. But our curatorial approach was highly site-specific; we wanted to engage with everything from nature to culture. The advantage was in itself a major challenge in the curatorial process. Luckily we learned fast to listen to every stakeholder. I believe that it was at this juncture that the real curatorial framework emerged.

**NT:** The title of the exhibition, *Edge of the Wonderland*, is suggestive of a variety of ideas. Wonderland could be interpreted as paradise and 'edge' conjures the idea of a border or something on the brink. How are these notions connected?

**VP:** *Edge of the Wonderland* is a curatorial theme that was conceived by Prof. Jiang Jehong, the lead curator. It was inspired by the geography and scenery of Krabi.



**Jana Winderen**

*Through the bones*, 2018. Courtesy of the Office of Contemporary Art and Culture, Ministry of Culture @ Jana Winderen

He came to survey the location and saw potential exhibition sites in a variety of places from the beaches, to the islands, mangrove forests, waterfalls, streams, caves, and the town. He connected these sites with the general human concept of Wonderland that could be found in every human civilization from ancient China and ancient India to modern English literature. He also welcomed proposals from different artists that attempted to convey their version of a wonderland either by revisiting cultural heritage or presenting its speculative post-apocalyptic version. However, the most interesting part of the theme resided in the "edge". Curatorially speaking, he proposed three interpretations of the "edge" as a concept. First, the edge can be related to geography, given that Krabi is in the Southern part of Thailand and it connects with Andaman Sea. It is the start and the end of a territory, the Thai kingdom. The edge is where one finds where one belongs and at the same time one discovers a possibility to depart; it is also an entry point from the outside. One can see this as a contact point for transformation, and migration, both human and natural. The second meaning of the edge is historical and cultural. Krabi means double-edged sword in Thai. The province took this name from an ancient sword found in a historical excavation. The third edge is the most conceptual. It acts as a border between in and out. It represents the beginning of the unknown.

**NT:** The works in the exhibition were commissioned for the Biennale and were



**Jana Winderen**

*Through the bones*, 2018. Courtesy of the Office of Contemporary Art and Culture, Ministry of Culture @ Jana Winderen

all site-specific, how were they selected and what was the process for assigning spaces?

**VP:** The curatorial team came up with the longlist together. Everyone was involved in the process of nomination. The board also provided us with their list of artists. We did our own research along the way. For example, I went to Shanghai and Singapore to promote the biennale and did studio visits as well. After a period of study, we shortened the list and invited the artists in the shortlist to submit an initial proposal. If we saw a possibility in the initial proposal, we would invite the artist to do a site visit to refine the proposal before the final submission.

**NT:** The artists seem to have taken the challenge and created poignant works. Are there any that stand out in your opinion?

**VP:** Every work was a new commission and site-specific, so I think each had its own story to tell particularly about the biennale and Krabi. There are a few that offered an extraordinary view by making visible something that was hidden in plain sight. For example, Vong Phaophanit and Claire Obussier's *Gilding the Boarder* was one



**Zheng Bo, Life Is Hard**

*Why Do We Make It So Easy?*. 2018. Courtesy of the Office of Contemporary Art and Culture, Ministry of Culture @ Zheng Bo, Life Is Hard

work that stood out because of its approach and scale. The artists took the concept of gilding from the traditional Tai and Lao cultures where one pays homage to anything by decorating it with gold leaf, whether a Buddha statue or an ancient tree. The artists first proposed to apply sheets of gold leaf around the island's edge which we thought could be easily understood by Thai audiences and encourage further discussion about contemporary art and the environment. However, it was very challenging technically because we were not allowed to interfere with nature, could not attach alien material, or drill into the rock. The artists and the Thai technicians came up with a technique to cover the island with aluminum plates and used rubber hammers to make the plates touch the surface before gilding. The gilding itself took the form of a performance during the opening week as if we were paying homage to nature. Map Office's *Ghost Island* took a similar approach. They were working with a local architect and local divers to make an island out of bamboo, covered with fishing nets. Some nests were retrieved from the sea by the local community of scuba divers. These are ghost nets, which usually means they have abandoned fishing nets that were fishing autonomously. Over time, they would accumulate everything underwater and become a big sculpture. This issue caused by irresponsible fishing activities has been a problem in Thailand and the Anda-



**Vong Phaophanit and Claire Oboussier**

*Gilding the Border*, 2018. Courtesy of the Office of Contemporary Art and Culture, Ministry of Culture

@ Vong Phaophanit and Claire Oboussier

man sea for many years. And most of the locals and casual travelers were not aware of what was happening underwater. The work made visible that activity which would remain invisible to us otherwise. Other works that explored the relationship between nature and culture are worth mentioning. The Japanese artist Takafumi Fukasawa did a community-based work by playfully creating a *Football Field for Buffalo*. The Thai artist-duo Jiandyin was tackling controversial environmental issues by attempting to create an alternative source of energy from a solar cell. Zheng Bo, another Hong Kong-based artist was working with a local orchid preservation community to create an installation that questioned our contemporary life in the era of ecological catastrophe.

**NT:** Although devastated by the tsunami of 2004, Krabi has seen a steady flow of seaside tourists. Art tourism is new to Krabi. How will this Biennale affect both beach tourism and art tourism and is there a distinction between the two?

**VP:** This is a very crucial question for the biennale. I think the Thailand Biennale started as a project that framed itself as fostering the culture industry. Tourism played an important role in the framing of the project from the State administration's point of view. Biennales usually would not put tourism on its agenda although the city, locale, or other sites of the project directly benefits from it. In this case, Thailand Biennale put tourism at the forefront. The Mayor of Krabi knows well that the environment has suffered from the non-sustainable tourist activities and he sought art and culture as an alternative. The biennale became a means for the province to bring in other types of tourism into the area, beside the beach tourism. And it became a method to draw the tourists away from the beach to other parts of the town, to other natural sites and communities. While we were working on the installation, the national park even decided to close Maya Bay on Phi Phi Island to tourists. That should be enough to tell how precarious the environment was.

**NT:** Have the locals embraced the Biennale? Have they seen it as beneficial or detrimental to their livelihood?

**VP:** The local population was initially skeptical about the biennale. I think the majority remains skeptical to this day. They were familiar with painting and sculpture but not contemporary art. So, I think we were successful in introducing contemporary art to the local population through collaboration, whereby curators and artists alike take on a learning role. For example, we were successful in working with communities that already tried to develop sustainable tourism and were already aware of environmental issues, particularly Koh Klang and Tha Pom Klong Song Nam. It was the local population that guided us through our projects. For example, Valentina Karga's *Coming Community* was a series of workshops with the community in Koh Klang aimed at creating a monument together from local technologies. The process of working together was so important that the community even proposed sitting for the sculpture themselves. I think this process of self-curation is tremendously fruitful for us curators who sometimes mindlessly try to put art where it is beautiful but meaningless.

Jana Winderen's *Through the Bones* was another good example. Her practice entails underwater field recording and she was interested in the unique ecology of the site. While she was exploring the site, she was lucky enough to meet a fisherman who can listen to the underwater sound using his wooden oar. While we were interviewing him, she handed her headphones to the fisherman and invited him to listen through her sophisticated field-recording machine. The encounter inspired her to come back and learn the skill from him and the other fishermen in the south. It even turned into a long-term project beyond the biennale. The locals could relate to her work through the medium of sonic practice. Through her project, the kids in the community became interested in learning the technique from the elders again. At one point, I realized the question of art has become less significant than the event of knowledge we could initiate through the biennale. It was more important than creating fantastic spectacles.

Unfortunately, these events were not significant from the administration's point of view. Recently, the government confirmed that the Thailand Biennale will move to Nakornrachasima, a province in the Northeast of Thailand in 2020. I think this traveling model becomes problematic for curators and artists who aim to create a meaningful change in a cultural landscape. It is particularly difficult for those that work with ecology because tourism is fast, while the environment takes time to recover and grow. For the Thailand Biennale, it is important where and how contemporary art fits into this contradictory relationship if the biennale wants to continue working with natural sites and environmental issues. For the first edition, I think we were able to sow the seeds of contemporary art, but we did not have a chance to take care of it through the structure of the biennale, let alone reap the fruit. It is fortunate that some artists, curators, and local participants continue their projects on their own because they recognize that they are important. However, I think they are very precarious ventures. I think I learned the hard way that it is crucial to keep the concern of sustainability on the table at all times.

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**Nora A. Taylor** is the Alsdorf Professor of South and Southeast Asian Art at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She is the author of *Painters in Hanoi: An Ethnography of Vietnamese Art* (Hawaii 2004 and Singapore 2009) co-editor with Boreth Ly of *Modern and Contemporary Art: An Anthology* (Cornell: SEAP 2012) as well as numerous essays on Modern and Contemporary Vietnamese and Southeast Asian Art.

# A heart the size of an armchair

*In 2015, a dead sperm whale was found floating in Singapore waters. Although the species has been sighted in Southeast Asia, this was the first such record for Singapore. The Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum recovered the carcass, studied the remains and prepared the skeleton for display. While the title and setting of this short story are based on these real events, this is a work of fiction, and all characters, dialogue and depictions are fictional. I was commissioned by the National Arts Council of Singapore to contribute to an anthology on the theme of journeys, and this was what came to mind.*

text by **Yu-Mei Balasingamchow**

**O**n her first day of working on the whale, Winnie set out before dawn and took the longest MRT train ride she had ever taken, from Sengkang station in north-east Singapore, all the way across the island to the westernmost station, Joo Koon. Most of the route was familiar – she had been making the same commute to the National University of Singapore for the past five years – and for the extra stretch from Clementi to Joo Koon, the train seemed to pass simply more of the same: stern HDB blocks and squat industrial buildings that hemmed in the elevated tracks, as if without them the train would run willy-nilly all over the place.

At Joo Koon, she met the rest of the team – all of them her senior colleagues at the natural history museum, none of whom she had worked with closely before. They nodded approvingly at the faded old T-shirt she was wearing over black track pants. Winnie understood why, after they had made their way to the work site along the coast at Tuas, where a ten-tonne female sperm whale sat rotting in the rising sun. It was as long as a bus, a great sprawl of greasy black flesh shadowed with patches of murky, bloody red. It smelled, no, *stank* like nothing Winnie had ever encountered in her life – not the chilled, muted vapours of the seafood counter at the supermarket where her mother worked, not the teasing suggestive salty sea breezes at East Coast Park, where Winnie went cycling with her boyfriend Wen Kai, not the disorienting, dense pungency of the fish market at Jurong Port, where she had bought freshly caught fish for a university zoology project. This whale stank of life, rotting, flaking and melting away, and Winnie found herself suddenly trying not to gag.

“Triethylamine oxide,” she sputtered aloud.

One of her colleagues, the sunny-faced Suhaila, gleefully handed her an N95 respirator mask. “And it’s all decomposing right in front of us.”

The whale had washed up at Jurong three days ago, dead but still bleeding from propeller cuts. The museum’s mammal experts had taken the lead to examine the carcass, but they needed help to extract research samples and recover the skeleton as quickly as possible, before the decaying hulk became a health hazard. Winnie, who worked with the insect collections, was known for being meticulous and having neat, font-like handwriting, so she had been asked to take notes, prepare specimen labels, and help however she could.

They were removing the whale’s stomach that day, and also the intestines, in sections that emerged as fetid, squishy, brown-black tubes. Winnie thought of the sau-

sages Wen Kai had ordered her for brunch the day before, then quickly suppressed the thought. No one had thrown up yet; she didn’t want to be the first.

At lunchtime, they gathered under a tent upwind of the carcass, although the air was inescapably saturated with its stench. “I wonder where the whale came from,” Winnie mused.

“We’ll know more once we really analyse its stomach contents and other samples,” enthused Professor Lee, who had driven over from the university to take a look at their work. “But sperm whales travel great distances, you know, they’re in all the oceans. This one could’ve come from anywhere – Pacific Ocean, Atlantic, Caribbean, Alaska...”

Winnie had only travelled out of Singapore a few times, never farther than Hong Kong and certainly not over any immense seas. And while she had watched her share of nature documentaries, the vast blue oceans and bizarre life forms populating them had seemed like they must exist on another planet or in another dimension, so little did they have in common with the tall buildings, crowded shopping centres and noisy roads that she had grown up with in Singapore.

Yet here, now, lay such a great beast before her – contorted and dead, for sure, but incontestably *real*, draped across a gravel strip between an incineration plant and the uneasy, grey-green waters of the Johor Strait. Although the team had removed enough of its upper back that the creature looked slumped and deflated, its acrid reek and the defiant clamour of blowflies on its flesh made it a throbbing, living, demanding presence that all of Winnie’s studies and research and daydreaming had not prepared her for.

Later that day, when the others were getting tired, Winnie asked if she could try cutting and removing the flesh. There was some murmuring about how she hadn’t handled large carcasses before, and given her small build – Suhaila teased that she was short enough to have been swallowed whole by the ten-metre whale – whether she had the strength to carve into the blubber. Eventually, the lead conservator offered to supervise her, sharpened a knife and handed it over. Winnie stepped up to the mass of whale, which stood as high as her waist, took a deep breath while trying to ignore the smell, and used both hands to plunge the knife into a section of flesh. Through her thick industrial gloves, she could feel the whale’s form give way, then retract, and she had to keep sawing steadily until she had loosened enough of a piece that she could use a meat hook to pull it off. Her gloved fingers sank into the oily segment as she carried it to the bucket containing discarded flesh, trying not to inhale, trying not to drip gobs of decaying whale matter onto herself, all too aware of the pelagic wetness oozing all over her gloves.

On the train ride home that evening, it felt strange to curl her fingers around a cool metal pole instead of a sun-warmed knife hilt, and to feel the sharp, scentless cold of air-conditioning on her face. When she reached home, her mother exclaimed at the smell of sweat and whale that wafted in with her. “Go and soak your clothes in a pail, don’t mix them up with ours. If the smell gets into your father’s clothes, nobody will want to take his taxi.”

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The smell worsened over the next few days. The carcass lay in the full glare of the unsympathetic July sun. Even as more and more of it was sliced up and removed, the smell seemed to thicken and coagulate around the people labouring over what was left. Everything felt slathered in oil – the twisted organs and slabs of flesh, the knives and meat hooks, their gloves and boots and masks and goggles. “It’s so smelly, we can’t even smell how sweaty we are,” someone joked, although that didn’t stop Winnie from sniffing herself anxiously during their breaks.

To avoid getting the smell on her things, she kept her phone sealed up in her bag throughout the day, even though this meant that she couldn’t reply to Wen Kai’s messages. He didn’t understand why she had to work through the weekend and why

she said she couldn't see him until the recovery of the whale was completed. As she squatted down to photograph and measure the whale's internal organs, gleaming sebaceously in the sun, she imagined Wen Kai sitting in his air-conditioned office downtown, pointing and clicking and calculating on his iMac to produce impeccable technical drawings of the roads, tunnels and bridges that had filled his imagination since he was a child. They had been dating for two years, but she felt uneasy about letting him see her like this, with unevenly tanned, dry skin and the putrid odour of sea rot that lingered on her hair and body, no matter how hard she scrubbed in the shower every night.

Winnie was self-conscious, too, about taking the train, especially after work. She thought people were giving her dirty looks and moving away from her, even first thing in the morning. She changed to taking a longer train route that arched across northwest Singapore, avoiding downtown and all the people in Raffles Place office wear or slick Orchard Road fashion. She hoped the route would be less crowded, but it wasn't. There were the same waves of people streaming in and out of train carriages, flowing up and down escalators, coursing past turnstiles. Like schools of fish, she thought, without the coordination and grace of schooling fish.

A few days after Winnie joined the team, they reached the heart. It looked like a squidgy mass of withered vessels and ventricles that had collapsed on itself. Winnie was too inexperienced to be allowed to handle it, so she took photographs from every angle and jotted down her colleagues' observations. "When the whale was alive, with all the blood in it, this must have been roughly the size of an armchair," said Jonathan, one of the mammal researchers, as he carefully unfolded some of the thick heart muscles.

Winnie imagined the heart re-inflating with life, the now almost bare skeleton of the whale re-expanding with breath and possibility. "I wonder how come she died," she said without thinking, "I wonder what happened to the rest of her pod."

"We don't know enough yet," Jonathan replied. "We might find out after studying these samples, but even then... There's a lot we don't know about sperm whales at all."

This got the group talking about various theories they had researched or received from zoologists in other parts of the world, yet by the time they had packed the heart to be transported to the museum, they had more questions than answers about how old the whale might be, what it had been doing, uncharacteristically, in the shallow waters around Singapore, or what had killed it. "Well, in the old days, she would've been killed for all that blubber we're incinerating," one of the older scientists said dryly.

As they moved back to the carcass, Jonathan asked, "How, Winnie? You want to put aside your insects, come and study whales and cetaceans for a few years?"

Winnie shrugged; she was too hot and tired to think. She had wound up working on insects because that had been the only vacancy at the museum when she graduated a year ago. She had applied to the museum only because jobs were scarce then and her zoology professor had written her a glowing recommendation. And she had majored in life sciences only because she had happened to do well in biology in her A levels.

Now this whale had turned up, literally out of the blue. A few people had started calling it the Jubilee Whale, since Singapore's golden jubilee of independence was just a few weeks away. On the trains, on TV or in newspapers, Winnie saw advertisements for SG50 celebration tie-ins, everything from Tiger beer to Brazilian waxing. Only the forklift operator, who was responsible for moving large chunks of whale flesh into the incinerator plant, had scoffed, "*Pantang* lah," at the notion that a smelly, rotting dead whale bleeding from a propeller injury could be a good omen for a national celebration.

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What was left of the whale was cooking in the sun. Steeped in its own oil, exposed to thirty-degree heat, the remaining flesh clung even more stubbornly to the whale's ribs and vertebrae. Winnie and the team took turns carving it off in finer and finer slices, until one day, finally, they were done.

They laid out the whale's spinal column, ribs and metre-long lower jaw in a row, all the bones still blackened with grease. After adding the pectoral fin bones at either side, the arrangement looked like the charred remains of a two-armed, legless alien creature that had been stomped into the ground. Everyone posed behind it for a group photograph. The mammal researchers would come back to blanch and degrease the bones, preparing them to be shown at the museum, while the rest of the team, including Winnie, would go back to their usual jobs the next day.

When Winnie left Tuas that day, she decided to go to East Coast Park, which was near where Wen Kai lived. Usually, she took the train, then switched to a bus, but this evening she decided to take the buses all the way. It was a longer and more winding journey, requiring her to change bus several times and taking her through parts of Singapore she had never looked at closely before. She sat at the back of the bus, away from the other passengers where she didn't feel so self-conscious about how she looked or smelled. Whenever the bus reached a major traffic junction, she felt a brief surge of anticipation, knowing that it might go straight or turn in any number of directions, that it was not committed to a single, uncompromising road.

Out of habit, she headed for the underpass that led to the park, her usual meeting spot with Wen Kai. She considered texting him – it was well after office hours and he should be home – but the thought of all the questions he would ask about the whale wearied her. It was too much to describe; it was more than he could imagine. She forged ahead into the park.

At this hour the place was deserted. She followed the route she usually took with Wen Kai along the paved concrete path. To her right, immaculately planted trees, angkana, sea almond, casuarina; to her left, the restless, dark beach. When she reached a fork in the path where they usually went inland, she stepped instead onto the grassy patch that sloped down to the beach. Past the signs that warned "UNSTABLE COASTLINE", past the slender coconut trees slanted at wind-blown angles, she trudged down the shifting, unpredictable sand until she was a few metres from the water. The air was humid and unmoving, as it had been during the day.

She pulled off her scrunchy and her hair fell limply against her neck. She began to remove her shoes and clothes, one sticky piece at a time, dropping them into an untidy pile on the lukewarm sand. She had never done anything like this before.

Naked, she smelled deeply, fully, foully of the sea. She waded into the cool, murky water, permeated with the same chemicals and rubbish and decomposing matter that the dead whale must have tasted in its final days. She sensed the change in buoyancy, the gentle surge of energy pressing her back to shore. She held her breath, picked up her feet and let her whole body sink beneath the water.

**Yu-Mei Balasingamchow** is the co-author of *Singapore: A Biography* and co-editor of *In Transit: An Anthology from Singapore on Airports and Air Travel*. Her short fiction has won the Mississippi Review Fiction Prize, been shortlisted for the Commonwealth Short Story Prize, and been published in the UK, US and Singapore. She has received grants and fellowships from the Sewanee Writers Conference, Ragdale Foundation, Vermont Studio Center and Nanyang Technological University. Yu-Mei is originally from Singapore and now lives in Boston. She has an MFA in Creative Writing from Boston University and is working on a novel and short story collection.

# Myco-fish swimming

*What happens when covid-time thrusts upon us a time of both deep need, and distant caring? At a time when we are collectively going inwards and discovering what we have neglected or overlooked, the quest for insight renders us teetering precariously on boundaries of visibility. This written piece is part of a longer project about the combinations of fiction and non-fiction. It dwells on human attempts at caring, and examines how missed caring rhythms and boundary disputes take place across lagging time and non-embodied space. How do we care? And how might some more-than-human relations express boundary disputes arising in a time of digital, vicarious hypercaring?*

text by **Ng Huiying**

images by **Michelle Lai** and **Agnieszka Cieszanowska**

## **A short note on androids, care and repair**

The “android woman” Katherine Hayles names in Philip K. Dick’s work resembles the hyposexualised or asexual woman in George Orwell’s novel, *1984*. What these books have in common is their (male) author, dystopian setting, and telling conflation of humanity with a particular notion of romantic love. In this conflation, lack of humanity or sociality is associated with the non-responsive female presence — either hypersexualised or out of reach.

Yet lack of care is not how the pandemic is playing out. Over-caring as over-expressiveness is appearing amidst shards of fear. In the absence of care, touch, intimacy, our need for and from another can grow stronger. Our need for another to care for oneself; our need to care for another; our need to care for another in the way we want them to care for us; our need to give care, as a means of being the carer. These scenarios of hypercaring hold criss-crossing lines, stepping over boundaries, creating interference. Instead of the resonances that we imagine more caring to produce, wavelengths of care provision may jar with, or distort each other.

Hayles (1999) describes how the androidism in a woman’s personality causes a reaction in a male character, when the two are brought into close proximity with each other. This reaction is an experience of “radical instability in the boundaries that define him and his world”.<sup>1</sup> Because of the gender dynamics at play—in women meant to be caring, warm, affectionate—emotional absence is a signifier of inhumanity.

So then, what happens when covid-time thrusts upon us a time of both deep need, and distant caring—when a similar “androidism” is experienced? In struggling to reorient and find the new normal of care between old relationships, does caring become a power struggle: at its core, a boundary dispute?

“The struggle to achieve autopoietic status can be understood as a boundary dispute in which one tries to claim the privileged “outside” position of an entity that defines its own goals while forcing one’s opponent to take the “inside” position of an allopoietic component incorporated into a larger system”.<sup>2</sup>

Alongside this is the quest for self-knowledge. At a time when we are collectively going inwards, overturning rugs and stones to find parts of ourselves or others that had been neglected or overlooked, the quest for insight renders us teetering precariously on boundaries of visibility. As the boundaries of our sub-

jectivities loosen, the impulse to seek protection, and to hold together so one does not implode into disassembling fear or emotional disarray is a self-defence mechanism to maintain one’s autonomy. To be independent, “self-possessed”, not possessed by another, means not revealing a crack in one’s self-possession, such that another’s will can be exerted upon one. But this also breaks the possibility of true interconnection: of interconnection made through the consent and participation of all involved in the relation, and therefore the formation of trust.

The impulse to re-member is an act of repair; reparations of gender, caring, and the distribution of reproductive labour.

This written piece is part of a longer project about the combinations of fiction and non-fiction. It dwells on digitally-mediated human attempts at caring, and examines how missed caring rhythms and boundary disputes take place across lagging time and non-embodied space. It addresses Hayles’ tension: rather than a male narrator’s lament of the un-caring female figure, it deals with vicarious hypercaring in a digitally-mediated time, bringing up new, often-inarticulable boundary disputes. Boundary disputes are articulated through the help of some more-than-human relations.

## **Notes**

[1] Hayles, Katherine (1999) *How we became post-human: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. pp.162-3

[2] Ibid, p.161

## **N** **ain: presence**

She is working on a text during the heatwave. The pandemic is current—it’s always current—somehow, time has shifted to an overwhelming sense of *now*. Now that bodies must survive to do the shit jobs, companies and governments are racing to control any levers they can find: it’s a daily play-by-play of overlapping races.

Right now, waving through her mind is the race to produce vaccines and new immune bodies.

It’s hard to focus in this heat. The currency of this new Aquarian age was indeed one of information and ideas, as the astrologers predicted, except it came as a surprise to the world: actual airborne critters too small to see with the naked eye. These genetic packages are now seeding new immune systems. She’s partly relieved; she didn’t think she could have handled more drawn-out ruminating—or more chatty twitter feeds. Instead, microbial spirits have risen and caused tremors in the capitalist machine, enough to question the system, but not to undo the aspiration towards fully automated luxury communism. The individuated, self-confident manners of the Silicon Valley-type white personas aggravated her: it was just more of the same neo-colonial globalization attitude, couched in the language of liberal hipsters.

No matter. She abandons the linear writing and turns from her table. It’s an afternoon for action. The pause allows her mind to sieve through distractions floating in her digital workspace: disengage from the machine; connect with the gut. The linearity of her digital work scares her. It’s not the long sentences that she habitually writes, but the addictive chain of action that she watches people moving through, hooked up to their screen-dreams of luxury communism: consume, buy, sleep, fuck, consume.

“Organise,” says a myco-fish to her, from the corner of her ear. She experiences it as a tremble and nibble. It’s pleasant. These myco-fishes have been exemplary in their habitation so far; she’ll probably let them stay a little longer. Their trembles and ear-nibbles accompany her as she moves to the kitchen—adding to the sway of her hips and doublesteps: each step she takes comes at her twice, first the step she experiences in her

body, and then, with the faintest delay, a shimmering shadow-step experienced by the myco-fishes.

The myco-fishes. These small organisms remind her of specks of dust in sunlight. Golden, a little translucent pink around the edges, they're combinant forms of mycelial bodies and friendly bacteria. Lookalikes of kefir grains to the naked human eye — yeast and lactic acid bacterial formations — less like the flat material formed by scobies, though no less symbiotic.

Ever since she'd started growing the mycelial network in her homefarm, the myco-fishes have started taking root too. Not uninvited: she'd followed a recipe from a trusted shamanic site to prepare her communal house for them, and then to invite them in: simple steps — find a place on your body you enjoy; feel it, rinse it with a wash of regular thoughts for a couple days; invite the fishes by tapping that part of the body while breathing.

She'd tried it. Breath in — directing the mind and fishes to her ear; breath out — mind retreats, fishes stay.

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The myco-fishes follow the stream of her consciousness: they sparkle in the currents of thought. It's fun playing with them on her breath. The first times, it was pure glittery fun: her inhales and exhales punctuated by stardust in her mind. After she got the hang of it — working that mind muscle — the fishes started to connect with her; or rather, she started being able to dial in to their frequency. Pure aesthetic appreciation became physical. That's when the fun begins, the recipe had said. It was right.

"Organise," the fishes are now saying. She feels it as a feather slip of a thought. It's light for a big word. The fishes sometimes get excited with ideas; then they pulse. It's a little erotic.

Right now, it's light, gentle, a purr in the background.

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When the fishes purr, it usually indicates they're comfortable and warm, contented. These ones are mostly of the aspirational variety: the hint of a thought about a yearning, desire, or hope, and they begin flicking their tails.

She was pleased when these fishes came. The first ones. An older friend once told her how gardens receive the seeds it most needs — seeds dropped off by passing birds or animals, bringing things the garden needs for itself, and its carer. These fishes came swimming up when she'd opened her communal house. In they came, tentative, then clear and alert as she welcomed them, streaming bubbles of oxygen their way. It wasn't clear to her what species they were till about a week after, when she'd been reading something brilliant, and they began cartwheeling. A little dizzy from the swooshing they generated, she curled upon a rug, and followed them as they began to ride the waves.

Female desire — so mysterious, so wonderful. With them, it was somehow even better. Gentle nibbling of one's own will, creating an arching of release, a point of contraction, and the next — unthinkable pivot — torrent of release.

So different from the heteronormative traumatic touch, a penetration by unknowing fingers.

Now at the kitchen, she reaches for some fruit, peels them, pops open the lid of her scraps bin. It's nearly full. She brings it out into the sun. Time to feed the mycelial network threading through the soil.

Microbes have been on her mind of late — not just literally. The myco-fishes are one thing, it's been fun playing with them (or they're playing with her, one can't be sure). But with the pandemic and the promise of the "information" age, this past year has felt like a new bioinformatics era ushering itself in — like that thing she once read about "hypertext kinship", written by someone already nearly two decades ago. Pretty sexy name for cellular-level partnership. She was a bit worried though about implications for business: the sexier it sounded that overlapping characteristics could be found between species, the more businesses would try to programme their own unicorns: defy the neat nested categories of old phylogenetic models by scripting new biological ones. Once novel, the intentions of synthetic biology and its resulting protocol (design, code, produce) are increasingly habitual modes of thought in the industries of digitally-programmed biology.

Again, that same linear progression. People once trained to think, now buy so quickly into the idea of making the simplest linear link, of quick fails and quick learns, and rarely manage to detach from linearity. Imagine  $x$  learning cycles for every person on Earth, multiplied by the daily average number of people on the planet, weighing for the mortalities and births occurring at any one point... Obviously, the faster people went through their cycles, the faster humans could detach from linearity — in thinking, in building models, in administration and finance. But faster cycles also meant higher numbers of failed cycles — i.e. unlearnt lessons. Worse than false positives because they sometimes created the opposite effect: withdrawal, depression, disengagement. These were like having someone hitting the pause button on actual growth, while the tape continues spinning without the music. No music, no life.

No. The real timeline that matters — to her at least — is simple: consciousness, rising. Before the pandemic, consciousness had more or less flatlined. The surge in digital linearity had almost cancelled any effects from global solidarity. Right now it was rising again. More time at home — stretched out on a rug for the foreseeable future — somehow seemed to be translating to more focused attention to locality. People found these trailing vines of thought and began rooting them, or began uprooting ones they didn't want in their mind-beds. The sudden respite meant the wellness capacities that had been accumulating for some time, suddenly had a massive home-bound audience.

That was one reason the myco-fishes were gaining so much in popularity. They helped you trace your thoughts. The package that they came in even promised greater consciousness via your plants, if you had a soil-based garden.

Those were their exact words, actually. "We help *you* trace *your* thoughts. We set you up for *your* Life." And they ran on a lifetime commoning membership, non-subscription based model.

Ever since the tiny DIY company selling the myco-fishes had gotten into Round A-listings, the businesses selling hazy insubstantial dreams had started perking up. Starting to lose their grip made them a little less complacent. No better way to change the industry than to flat-out scare them.

Still. Much as she was hopeful, she was also mostly skeptical. Not that more than a close handful of people had to know that. Hypertext kinship was exciting and scary — scientists often misrecognised the natural overlaps in phenological characteristics as boundary crossing and category confusion (based on old phylogenetic models), but

businesses saw massive opportunities in creating new recombinant genetic forms. Proprietary and for sale, of course, mostly to leisure spas. Along with the proprietary products — hybrid cat-dog pedigrees, gourmet seaweed-jackfruit noodles that glowed, fishes that could live in salt baths while nibbling off your dead skin — DIY users were also creating their own combinant forms, like these naturally-occurring myco-fishes. The unlocking of the synth-microbiome language interface had brought a whole troupe of lay users wanting to create their own dæmons.

Her myco-fishes might be said to be an early proto-runner in this race the businesses didn't even know they were destined for — to bring hypertext kin to humankind, at scale, themselves evolving beyond recognition in the process. Once decolonized of their classificatory roots, the language of information systems would be on track to rewrite the DNA of social organizational structure.

What her mind continued to play with — and the myco-fishes were certainly helping—were alternate storylines: what if alien kin networks for salutogenetic discoveries in water and soil become a new recombinant force for a new “trans-specific biopolitics of giasociality” — with land, soil, earth?

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#### **Didi: dreams**

Didi's mind wanders, too much. It's been a grueling few days of non-stop brain chatter and her mind is stretched: it feels used, tired-out, drained. Like the mud cell battery she's been putting together to no avail.

Brain chatter never used to be a problem, but the past days have left her mind heavy, desiring her brownnoise headphones. Somehow drowning out her mind feels necessary: that and the deafening silence of her four walls.

Her dreams have been more lucid of late, too. Chatter in the day, dreaming at night. Not since 2012, on her 8th birthday, has she had this sort of dream — then, she was flying, lightweight and practising, merging with the air and feeling her freeform ability to defy gravity, the excitement of it.

Right now she's just trying to survive being 16. She's been told this is the toughest age, and indeed she has no way of comparing, but it has been filled with hopes and wishes that her reality just doesn't match up with. Tough? Not too bad. She doesn't have parents to tell her what to think, but her older housemates like to tell her she's an old soul. Perhaps collecting objects makes her old.

The mud cell battery she's trying to put together is evading her. She's split between the dream she had of it, and wondering if she's wasting her time. In the dream she was with people far older than her, and she'd felt like she was part of something important; that everyone here, as old as her housemates, was as excited as she was about the possibility of making microbial fuel cells — which her mud cell batteries were based on.

It was a strange dream. Probably from a newsbite from yesterday: an upscale Prepper had made headlines this week creating a new mycobacterium while trying to make mud cell batteries, and her favourite newsletter writer had just put out a piece about Preppers coming into contact with mycobacteria and surviving — relatively unscathed. The reigning internet theory was that one could initiate immunization to the mycobacter if one was exposed in small amounts to



**Michelle Lai and Agnieszka Cieszanowska**

*Still #1 from Alga Futures, film still, 2020*

them, but no one knew why or how some people fared better and others worse.

The bigger concern about Preppers though, wasn't that they would release a new strain of mycobacteria into the world — unlike just a decade ago, mycobacteria these days were not known to be particularly deadly, and were used by doctors to treat emotional disorders. The bigger concern was their way of reproducing with a vaster number of 'unproductive' genes — surplus genetic baggage, the scientific papers called them. Why the bacteria wanted so much to bring redundancy into their genetic material, scientists trained to think for the innovation factories could not understand. It seemed obvious to her. And obviously, being 16 was tough.

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#### **Whölle: work, tension**

*"Let go of your ego, be at one.*

*Please, just listen now. Empty your mind.*

*Take a deep breath in—*

*—inhale, exhale.*

*Inhale, exhale. Bring your mind to a quiet place."*

Peaceful words. Absorbing and accepting them over the chat window, their video switched on to the faceless speaker, feels like swallowing toxin. Whölle swallows.

Like swallowing cum when they do not desire it. It feels like a violation, again. After they had promised themselves to represent themselves, fully.

They find the strength to speak, later. It takes an effort and the words spill out.

"I know you have the healer's role. You may not seek to represent yourself that way, but you are a healer" — surely too definitive a way of putting it, they think, but the words are out there.

They sense dislike on the other end of the line. They trudge on. "You are a healer, but that healing work was precisely not something to be done, in that context. If it is done for yourself, that has to be clear."

"I needed interconnection," Maxi says. "To connect with you".

Amidst their own puffy eyes, they feel a twinge of hurt — interconnection at whose expense? The saviour finding healing by buffering their identity?

There is no need for fear. They're repeating this to themselves. I need to say this, they think. To mention a boundary has been crossed.

"I'm trying to get you to understand my point of view. Just listen, please. I didn't mention this earlier, because there were many overlapping rhythms, and I knew you needed the space to connect. I did that willingly for you. But I want you to know how I felt then: unsafe."

They tried to speak quickly, holding Maxi's silence.

"I appreciated it but I didn't need that. I would have recovered on my own if not for the healing work you tried to do. I know it was meant to heal. It was meditative work. But I did not feel safe being asked to take part in it, when I needed space of my own. It wasn't clear to me at the beginning that you needed it. I thought it was me you were trying to do it for."

"I said, do it for me. And you said, I'm doing it for you."

"Yes, I did. I was genuinely doing it for you because I realized that you needed it, in order to find balance. But I wasn't sure if you were clear yourself if you were doing it for me to find balance, or for yourself to do so. And that made me uncomfortable.

Silence.

"I didn't want you to do be doing healing work on behalf of me, by forcing it on me."

Do counselors have wet dreams, they wonder — getting high by helping?

More silence on the other side for a while.

"So I wanted you to have a broader sense of the situation," they said.

"That was your perspective of the situation." Maxi said.

Their mind clenched and unclenched; roiling emotions aside, there was nothing more to say.

Later on, retrospectively, they will understand this as the passing of an ending, and the beginning of something new, a new sense of self. Boundaries that needed protection were spoken for, and the lines of a particular field of play — of whose narrative was valid, whose perspective was the one "outside", the one with autonomy, with growth potential, with autopoietic ability — had been acknowledged. If not by Maxi then by something else, out there. By themselves.

Perhaps meeting another where the other's limit is, is care, too. And stepping forward to express these — Maxi has always asked them to do it, after all — is care, too, even if hard going.

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## **Nauin**

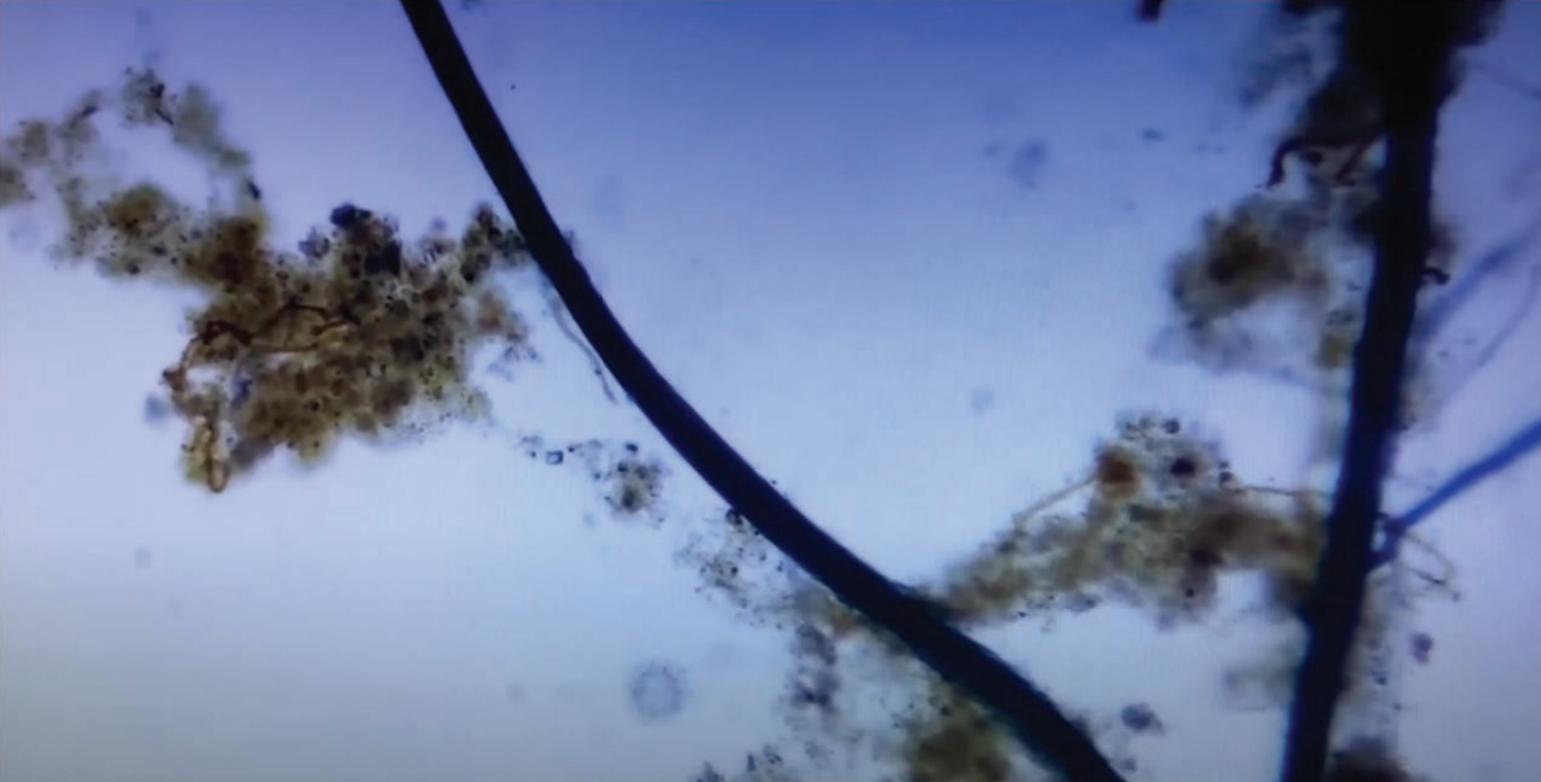
In between writing the scenes, between the needs to perform or play, she's depleted. She lies on a mat, a bed. Or, finally able to rest, she doesn't know what to do. It's almost as if addictive rest would make it hard to return.

The myco-fishes are a little quiet; without their dose of nitrates and carbon, they're a little less chatty. She's been trying to see if they can survive without the biofilm sold as their nutritional source.

She's 30, so when she first applied to take the myco-fishes, she didn't qualify for ease of infection — host risk factors included advanced age, male gender, slender and older Caucasian women, immune defects, structural pulmonary diseases, alpha1-antitrypsin deficiency — she didn't know what that last was, but these were associated with structural lung diseases — and she neither smoked nor had grown up in a densely polluted environment. Green fields and blue skies had done their work of giving her an immune system with fewer cracks, deficiencies.

So she had to take a longer route — with an aerosol spraytube. The label said it was best applied after a warm shower. This built up a gradual dose of myco-fishes in her — the tube recommended a slow three weeks to build "physical inhabitation". And to discover what they could do. There were other things sold at the shop she visited — you could get a pill for protection against UV radiation, which made you glow florescent blue like the tardigrades these proteins were extracted from. Like the myco-fish, how these worked exactly seemed to be constantly shifting — they were initially said to just provide proteins to the human system, but it seemed regular users began to develop their own proteins, and surely this begged the question of whether people were now genetically modified to be UV-resistant, or whether they still needed the pill to turn blue.

Having the myco-fishes was said to make a difference: while it didn't make you immune to non-tuberculosis mycobacteria and their effects on the respiratory system, the adverts said these boosted your body's recognition of these variants and reduced future susceptibility. She doubted these claims. The only susceptibility it seemed to reduce was emotional imbalance. The myco-fishes seemed to provide a balancing act within the bodymind, so people didn't feel drawn to truth claims that fed old scars.



Michelle Lai and Agnieszka Cieszanowska

Still #2 from *Alga Futures*, film still, 2020

#### Didi

She's been trying all day to lure the right mycobacteria into the cell, to no avail. She knows they'd be in the water from the open drain just outside the forest, if anywhere at all: she'd read that in places like Uganda where the water still had high microbial counts, the best ones could be found: "freedom molecules" they were called by the local cultivators. The big corporations sterilized the water to make sure their proprietary genetic information wouldn't rewild itself in the open. But people still found ways to get their hands on wild ones and make boot-leg copies out of them. Freedom always won. It was just a matter of time.

"What's your dream?"

Between working on the fuel cell and dreaming, she speaks to her mother. Cherishing time spent.

"I'd like to retire in a house with a garden, where there are the four seasons, where I can live peacefully." A pause. "But it's already past, it's no longer a dream now."

Travel has become only available to people with essential reasons. Retirement not being one of them. But that wasn't what her mother meant. Her mother was only speaking about dreams she'd willingly—not entirely—given up.

So often, this yearning, and self-restraint. Each withholding feels like a knot in her chest. There are so many, passed from her mother to her over the years. So many to be unwound.

"It's not too late. It's still a dream. I can bring you there.

"You don't have to do it for me. Live your life."

Her mom really doesn't get it, this necessary repair for damaged selves.

But she's probably too full of herself; probably she should go back to practical things — like the fuel cell.

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#### Nauin

The myco-fishes are swimming, kicking up their tails at her.

She's moving dream-like, washing up after a long day. The water trickles like haze down her body. On the wet floor, glitter sparklets sit on the surface of the water, a bubble bubble special bath foam.

A little like the myco-fishes.

She's never actually seen them with her eyes. Microscopic, they evade her human eye's sight. But they're visible when she closes her eyes and hums to find resonance: as the lids of her eyes shut off the visible light spectrum, she tunes in to a different spectrum of light emerging from their stealthy strumming.

*Vibrato, alto, piccolo*, and sometimes, when they're angry, *largo*.

They don't have a significant repertoire yet, but as she exposes them to new emotional registers, they've begun to form their own responses to them.

From them she's learnt what *pochipochi* feels like; not just the spatter of fat summer rain drops but the feeling of an anticipatory exuberance just opening its eyes.

Being with the myco-fishes all day and night, all the time — it's a partnership for sure, she's just not sure if it borders on codependence. They're a little less reactive than humans, though, and being with them gives her a bubble of calm so she leaves more centred than before.

They also ask quite a lot of her: because they're sensitive to her, emotional upheavals put them in a disarray — it feels like they literally scatter when she loses grip or exerts an unusual emotional charge. She doesn't like doing it to them, so she tries to manage her emotions as best she can. They are her responsibility too, though it's more likely the other way round. At times they transmit little signals to her—pink and yellow and green orbs, unfurling, like a sunny day of pollen grains suspended around her. Is this what roots feel like too, she wonders, growing in the cotton wool of loamy soil aggregates?

This afternoon she's rolling dough, easing out the stiff muscles of her eye. Yes, she thinks, the eye. Who'd have thought. Eye strain driving people to seek out activities without a screen. She's careful not to splay out her fingers — she's linked her myco-fish to the gesture; it registers transactions on the Shoal.

Identities have suddenly become extremely diffracted, mostly through screens but not only. It's been making it harder to write new profiles for her idea-prototypes. She's been following the phenomenon. Not exactly akin to identities in chat rooms of old — those were more *alter ego*-esque, when dreaming was still possible. These identities now are ID-tagged, linked to a passport or identification number, or bank account. It puts her on edge. Their specificity. Offering no room for escape, the allure, or anything other than the almost-real self. The always-

factual factoid. No room for the backstage now, for performers to take off their costumes and makeup. Businesses have no room to fudge, no margin of error. That's why consultants are rushing to get into the consulting business as collectives. While there's time to learn the ropes of this new trapeze.

The diffraction is both real and sublime. The real parts of people are filtered through multiple interactions, or in the authenticity of a split-second. Necessary to evaluate the veracity of everything else trailing their screen images: their twitter handle, web portfolio.

Amidst this, easing out the dough feels easier. She just has to focus on kneading it. She shares a mutual relationship with the dough. With the diffracted identities of talking heads, it feels a bit like a constant penny trading business. It's a little hard to get into, a little like too many aunties and uncles at the wet (not wildlife) market. Lacking the emotional precision of her myco-fishes. But she's also not been very good at excessive social stimulation.

Something in her resists becoming octopus. She'd rather spend her time nurturing integral wholes—wholes that become keepers of one another.

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### Whölle

The garden seems to be reflecting the state of their projects. It's week 7; slow growth. Short-rooted plants hold up short leaves, a little crooked. They can't dip much further down because the layer of soil is still too thin, they know. It was stacked leca pellets—>soil—>food scraps—>soil. Perhaps it needs to be mixed up after this harvest. And the food scraps ought to be composted fully first.

Already with the recent waves of protests sweeping North America, the lag of news-waves rolling across the world has been increasingly segmented. It is the act of mourning in motion, elapsing in twitter tides, followed by anger, then mourning again.

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### Nauin

As a longform journalist and occasional columnist of the Science Comms and Lifestyle desk, the risk of side effects from the myco-fishes was a small price to pay for insight into the emotional body of the green planetarism movement. Part hippie, part deep greenies, and part millennial and Gen Xers, the strongest gathering point of the movement was the promise that the incoming generation of children brought. Octavia Butler's *Parables* had been flying off the digital shelves — it was her job to track the rates. Unlimited downloads and dissemination, feeding text into emotional bodies.

It was likely that her myco-fishes grew a little different from the average user's. If there could be said to be an average. Mycobacteria were known to differ in species across continents and places, in Asia alone Singapore and Thailand showed different rates of infection — one might also call it, home-making — by different species of mycobacterium. They were not always easy to differentiate: depending on the tests and equipment at hand, which also varied across the technical capabilities of host countries. They were typically found in still water, places where the once-living soil had become too anaerobic from bad drainage or cement con-

tamination, so urban dumping grounds were frequent hunting grounds for the bacteriologists. Funnily enough, the leading host of the most amiable ones at this time was Uganda, where, despite the findings of a study in 2011 that found potentially pathogenic non-tuberculosis mycobacteria (NTM) in pastoral ecosystems at the human-environment-livestock-wildlife interface, the building of the Great Green Wall just up north also seemed to have also boosted the return of numerous new species. Scientists were flocking to Kenya and Uganda in search of a language to name them.

Names and classifiers. What the world knew of Nontuberculous Mycobacteria (NTM) had shot up in the last decade. Known as saprophytic organisms, they were not systematically pathogenic but known to befuddle the human body with a range of respiratory diseases, lymphadenitis, skin and soft tissue infection, and disseminated disease occurring mostly in immunodeficient hosts. Each species was different: *M. chelonae* rarely caused chronic lung disease, *M. abscessus* was suspected to do exactly that, in subtropical climates in Singapore and Japan, and while the virulent species *M. kansasii* was uncommon in Asia, it gathered in clusters in places — such as Singapore. No one really knew what conditions encouraged their growth, but their appearance in urban places with dense populations suggested unclean turgid water and soil provided the substrate for their growth. Growth matter. She had moved away from Singapore for work and a clearer mind, but now she wondered if there had been something in the soils and water there that had clouded it in the first place. Like unruly *Sauerstoff* that gets everywhere.

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### Whölle

Language is a material, and by now, they are a little more skilled in weaving with it. Part of the trick is to see language as the thread; and to see that it merely provides binding and form for the molecules of emotion to hold steady for long enough.

Like oxygen molecules. Oxygen too, is sour-stuff, *Sauerstoff*, a fabric, material, substrate, matter of the world too invisible to properly see. Emotions are made of molecules too, but experienced so differently: one can regulate emotions with neurotransmitter-targeting drugs, but why not do so in a less invasive, more meaningful way, with language?

And, if words are cat's cradles of woven thread, then metaphors are hypotheses and hunches. They function like cellophane between flanks of the brain, where the English flesh and the German *Fleisch* begin to congeal into a globule of meaning, and neural circuits form. And now there it is: memory and stored information.

Not so different from the myco-fish, really, with the emotional memory and data they hold, sort of like cellophane or film, helping the hippocampus and amygdala with memory and emotion. Somehow the myco-fish are metaphors for words and language.

They've spent perhaps most of their life marvelling at language: English they had to learn after moving to Singapore, transposing 22 years of Thai phrases and ways to a flatter language. They took on the myco-fish for precisely that reason: to explore language and their connection with meaning a little more. After years of psychoanalysing themselves, insecurity was still their biggest stumbling block, along with their weak boundaries and handed-down practices of deep anguish

from their parents. They were born 2 years after the Thammasat University massacre; they've always thought it might have stemmed from that.

Learning English, a language with more hardness to it than Thai, helped reconstruct some emotions that weren't available before to them. Sturdiness. Reflectiveness. Barriers where needed. Like a smooth, modern mirror. Shaping their then-23-year old mouth around the words, it felt like they were wearing a new self, a fuller, whole self, stepping into a new version of themselves.

Words are stuff, too.

This month it was the anniversary of the Thammasat University massacre. This year the stakes seemed higher; the old King had died, leaving the new one to rule in his place, and the unspoken pact of loyalty and acquiescence had exploded, raining anger like confetti over the streets. Words were incendiary, smoking bombs scrawled over train tracks and walls. They saw this from afar, witnessing the threads of the words holding together these emotions, a quilt they were still crafting.

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### **Nauin**

In some ways, her mother made the right choice. The most sensible one, and now she has progeny and a living investment to care for her in her older age. But too, the courage of having children. The sacrifice of years spent washing, cleaning, living out her life for others.

A quiet life, serving others. She used to think that form of subjection unwise. But she's started to see that the ability to live for others is a greater role than living for oneself alone.

Her mother's quiet work was the backbone of the family. The go-between, the glue that held, still holds everyone together. The one who is best able to listen, and to let go, and to remain in relation, without grudge.

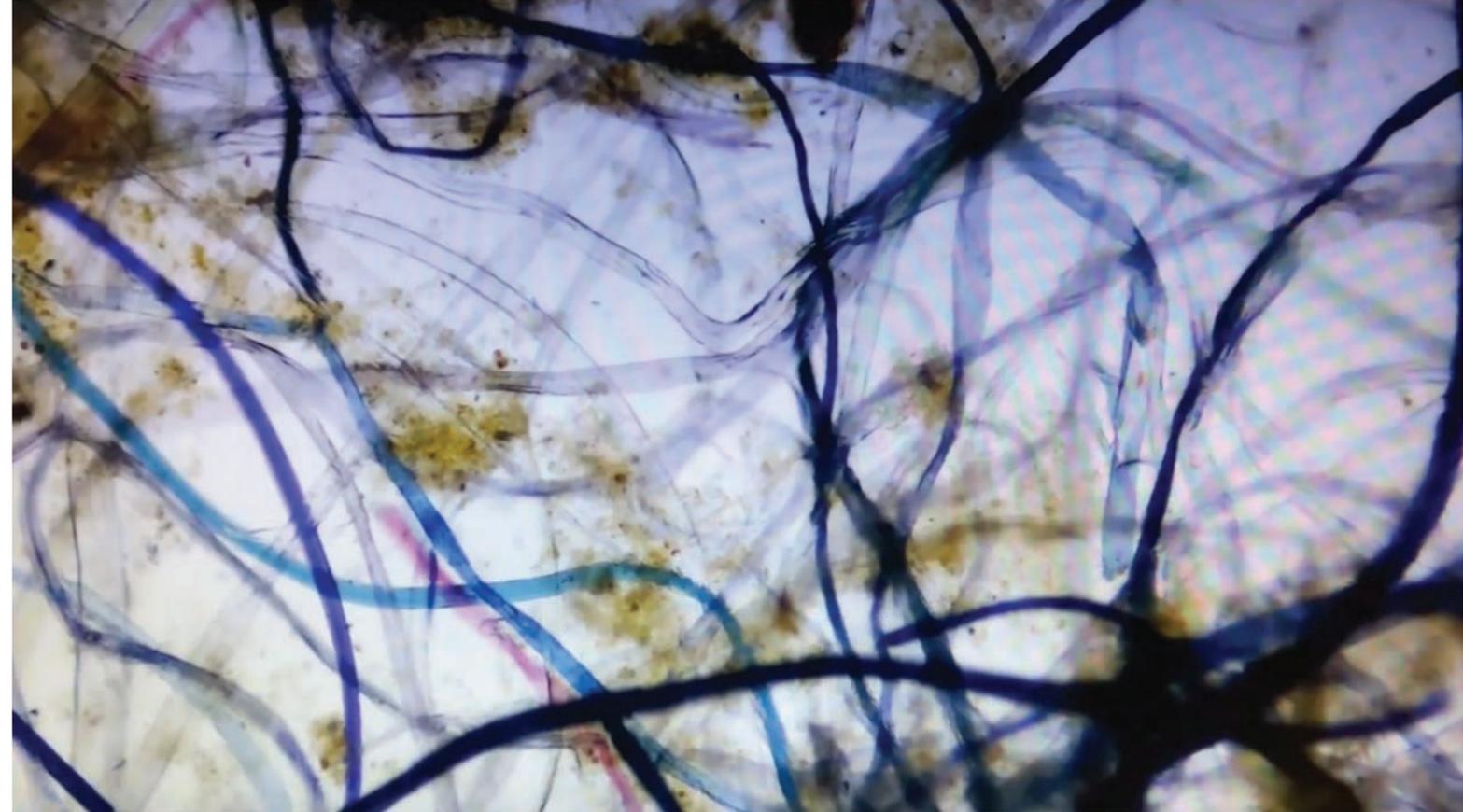
Somehow, all these are lessons she is having to learn, which she finds hard to swallow. Her pride. She used to think her mother had too little pride, or none. How does one live so wholly in service to others?

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### **Whölle**

The breath is always there with you. With them. What they learn about the parasympathetic nervous system is part of the fascination, but more fascinating is the way their nerves, frazzled from the day and turmoil of the streets and offices, straighten themselves out. They learn three breathing techniques today, natural breath, ocean breath, and the freediver's balloon breath. The breath that restores cell growth and replenishment by halting the breath, and slowing it down.

They take a breath in, shaping their lips in an O. They hold it. In holding there is stillness, the oceans' weight around them. Supported in water, the memory of amniotic fluid. Here is only a magic of stillness. Being. Awareness. Their myco-fishes, a little bit neglected of late (recent organizing has taken Whölle's attention away from them), stir, shifting their weight.



**Michelle Lai and Agnieszka Cieszanowska**

*Still #3 from Alga Futures, film still, 2020*

They let the breath out slowly. Already the deep breaths, and slowdown of breath-in and breath-out has left more oxygen in their system. They feel the effects of relaxation, a little high. They are held — even in the midst of this maelstrom of re-organising, they are held. Attunement.

Quiet mind, quiet body.

The mantra of yogic calm seems natural now, though their inner weather was tempestuous just earlier. Because each of us is important, and our actions consequential, their breathwork guide tells them, the more important that we each attune more deeply to what's inside. To take the wave and flow with the surf as the wave comes in. To be as a quiet river, which allows us to see what is. To find the right moments of connection and change.

Through their breathing, they hear their guide: "Sometimes in activism, activity does not equate to activeness. We can be active without moving, and inactive while making actions."

Organising has been challenging. The garden — still reflecting the state of their projects — luckily has expanded. In week 8, plants began to stand upright—a sudden growth spurt. Feeling into the soil finally; the soil feeding carbon into the tap roots of their plants. Projects began agglomerating momentum. The myco-fishes were happy with the background hum that the plant-soil interactions were keeping up, but they were a bit neglected, what with the new signals coming in.

"Don't forget us," they said. "Breathe so we can."

So here Whölle is, breathing. Returning to the breath, amidst this maelstrom.

"Breathe so we can," say the myco-fishes.

## Nauin

Her mother's birthday comes around. It's a quiet day, served in silence. But not an unwelcome silence this year, not stultifying. This year she has learnt to listen.

There is much meaning accrued between the things we know as words. More meaning, in actuality, for English words bear little meaning for those who come to pick them up only in the confines of bureaucracy.

English words are light, barely there. English can be spoken with briskness, brusqueness, spoken when dissociating, spoken as throw-away words.

She talks with her mother on the phone. Gathering pieces of her life story in pearls of time. Her mother is named for the pearl and the jade — longevity and solidity, purity and wholeness.

The interchange of words with her mother nowadays bears weight. She is able to hold what knowledge is offered to her—manifesting in the threadbare language they share — and see it in greater fullness. Wisdom gathers as a pearl, sits solid as jade under the surface of one's self.

“Sometimes I think, why I married your father. 有时候有一点后悔。”

“When I see you happy, when you have done things that make you happy, then I'm glad. When I see you sad, I wish I had not brought you into the world to suffer.”

She's 68 now. 30 years since she had her.

After a while she is moved to speak, and she does so, the tears starting up, “I've started to realize my work is to document”. Gasping; surprised at her emotion.

Her mother is still, still. Most of their dialogue does not happen in words. Perhaps it doesn't need to.

### Acknowledgements

This piece has benefited greatly from reading the work of César E. Giraldo Herrera's (literal) ground-breaking piece *Microbes and Other Shamanic Beings*, and a gem of an STS piece found via the Coronavirus Multispecies Reading Group, namely: *Trees and Seas of Information* by Stefan Helmreich. It would also not have been possible without the surrounding chatter of a proto-hive-mind consciously living, breathing, and folding in the world together, without productive intent. Thanks for feedback, suggestions and co-worked ideas go to the Futures Writing Research Unit, a free-floating node at soft/WALL/studs in Singapore, and colleagues at the Rachel Carson Center of Environment and Society in Munich, Germany.

**Huiying Ng** works through research, art, and advocacy to develop an iterative practice of knowledge gathering and transmission. Her practice includes writing, action research and multimodal interventions towards agroecological futures. She is a founding member of the Foodscape Collective and half of TANA, and a member of soft/WALL/studs. From 2020-2024, she is based at the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society in Munich, Germany, as a doctoral researcher. Huiying has presented a mixture of individual and collective work on commons and food in the Netherlands, Canada, the Substation and NTU Centre for Contemporary Art (Singapore), and her work has appeared in *Haus der Kulturen der Welt's* (Germany) *Technosphere* magazine, and the exhibition *IN THE FOREST, EVEN THE AIR BREATHES* curated by Abhijan Toto for the GAMeC in Bergamo, Italy. Her works can be found on [cargocollective.com/huiyingng](http://cargocollective.com/huiyingng).

# Letters to a 19th century grain of wheat

*This is a selection of letters written to a wheat grain that had been found in the straw as stuffing of a 133 year dead salt water crocodile shot at the mouth of the Serangoon river in Singapore in 1888. The letters and the grain were buried in Platåberget, adjacent to the Svalbard Global Seed Bank in 2019 as one part of a gesture by The Migrant Ecologies Project.*

main text by **Lucy Davis**; letters by **Marian Pastor Roces, Nguyễn Trinh Thi, Harriet Rabe von Foreich, Nils Bubandt and Anna Tsing, Faisal Husni, Marietta Radomska**

**O**n 10 June 2019, a single grain of wheat migrated to the Arctic circle and was ceremonially buried in Platåberget, adjacent to the Svalbard Global Seed Bank, on the Norwegian island of Spitsbergen. The grain had previously been buried in the straw of a 133-year-dead, 4.7 metre long, saltwater crocodile that was shot in 1887 at the mouth of a no-longer-existing river, the Serangoon River, in Singapore and kept for over a century in the colonial Raffles Museum.

This gesture of transporting this one grain to Svalbard was part of a collective artwork by The Migrant Ecologies Project. It was selected by an international jury of artists and scientists for *Agri-Cultures Seedlinks*, an exhibition conceptualized and curated by Dr. Fern Wickson from the Centre for Biosafety at University of Tromsø – The Arctic University of Norway.<sup>1,2</sup>

Our Migrant Ecologies contribution proposed to regard the same 133-year-dead, saltwater crocodile as a comparative seed bank to the Svalbard Global Seed Vault. The work was titled *Seeding Stories: A Guide to the Interior of a Salt Water Crocodile* and is one small part of an ongoing research exploration of the historic, material, genetic and poetic, interior lives of this crocodile and its contents that started in 2013.

For the *Agri-Cultures Seedlinks* exhibition, Migrant Ecologies Project designer Zachary Chan travelled to Svalbard with this very special grain and a series of other offerings.<sup>3</sup> The objective of this journey was to participate in a ceremony in which various works were offered to Platåberget Mountain and placed to rest in Gruve/Mine 3, a mining shaft adjacent to the Svalbard Global Seed Bank.

But also haunting this journey was a parallel discovery, initially by Kate Pocklington (currently Curator at the Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum, Singapore) that has drawn us through a silted mangrove of sources, all claiming in different ways that this very crocodile (currently exhibited in the same museum where Kate works) is believed to host the spirit of Panglima (Warrior) Ah Chong, 19th century gangster, Taoist mystic, and anti-colonial freedom fighter.

A question that Zach and I took with us to Svalbard was how such disparate beings as a wheat grain, a crocodile, and a Malayan spirit being, all entangled in the legacies of colonial agro-economies and monstrous dreams of progress might speak to the Svalbard Global Seed Vault in a time of mass extinction and climate change.

Singapore and Svalbard are of course two islands situated in radically different geopolitical and ecological contexts.

There was, as we know, a violent scramble for natural resources by colonial powers in 19th and 20th century, island Southeast Asia, in which Singapore

HOME

LETTERS

ABOUT



THE MIGRANT ECOLOGIES PROJECT  
SEEDING STORIES:  
GUIDE TO THE INTERIOR OF  
A SALT WATER CROCODILE

**The Migrant Ecologies Project**

*Seeding Stories: A Guide To The Interior Of A Salt Water Crocodile*



**The Migrant Ecologies Project**

*Left: Wheat Gleaning Ceremony, Singapore May 2019. Zachary Chan, Muhammad Faisal Bin Husni.*

*Photo by Kee Ya Ting. Right: The one grain we were able to find in the crocodile-straw in 2019 was inside this husk. The kernel is on the bottom row, second from right. Photograph by Kee Ya Ting Singapore, 2019.*

Can we compare the (A) scramble for Asian resources with a current Scramble for the Arctic?

Could Svalbard become the Singapore of the North?

Major wheat producing nations in 1770s:  
Russia, America, Chile, India, Egypt, NZ,  
Kamania, France, Austria, Hungary, Canada,  
Australia & England (agriculture, depletion)

We have not yet carried out genetic profiling of the wheat that was found inside the crocodile. It is most likely to have originated from India with other possibilities being Australia, New Zealand, Europe, Russia or even America or Chile.

Stories of metals and mining and how these fit into our story: John tin mines, Panglima Ah Chong, metal chain, the bullet that killed the crocodile, Liddelow's arms and ammo, sales stories of mining in Svalbard, minerals and gold pre-19th century. How did they acquire these minerals out of the mines? labor, metals, root- of global warming?

Most likely improvers of grain to Straits Settlements - Singapore? India? Australia?

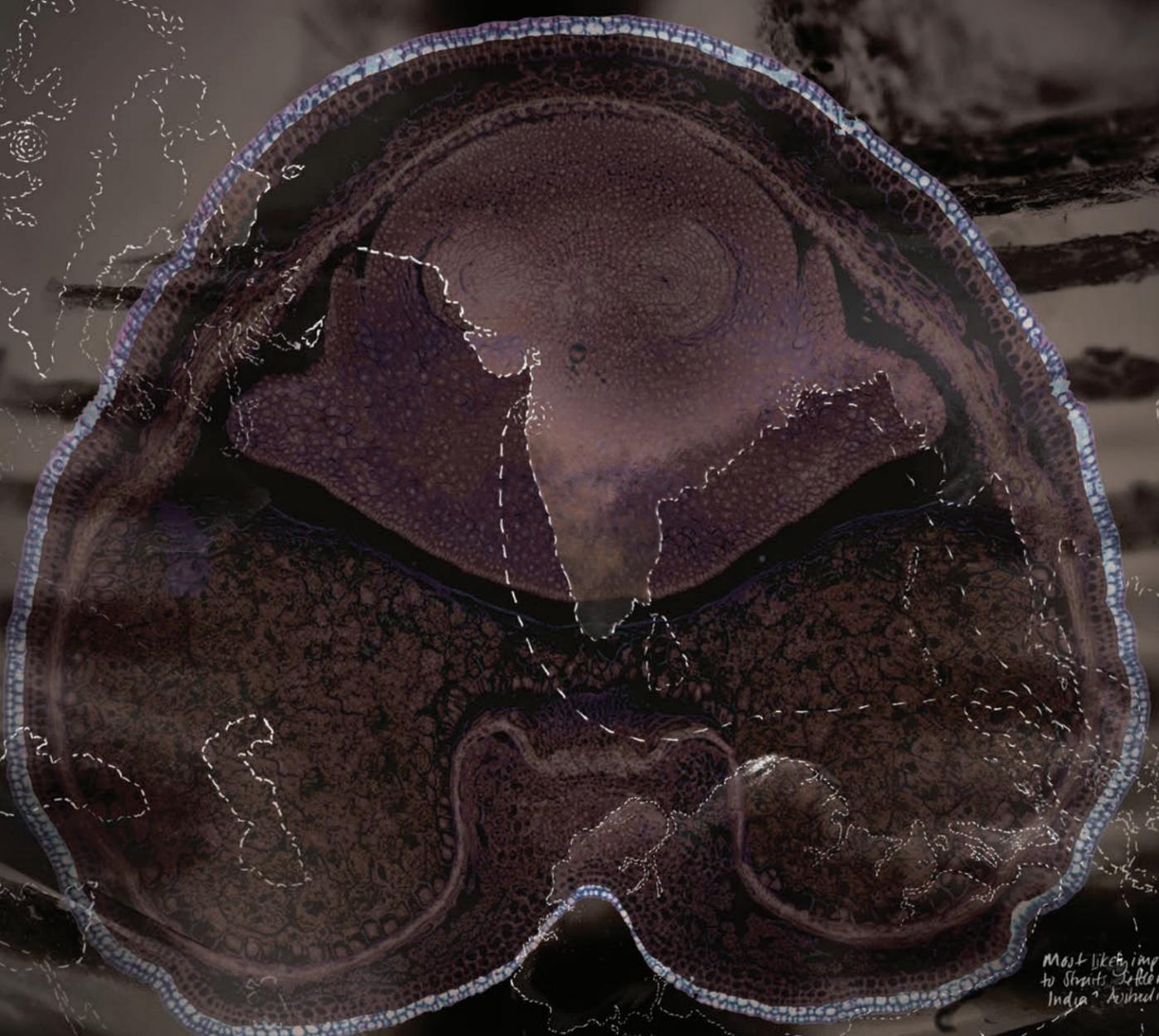
(19) Relationships betw British India Company export crops: grain, indigo, tea, opium and repeated famines?

Relationships betw plantation agriculture in Australia and the seed cultivation practices of Aborigine peoples?

And then what of those reasons?  
Those seeds?  
Those ones that made monsters of us?

09

10





**Marian Pastor Roces**  
Independent curator and writer on politics and culture  
Pastor Ancestral Home, C. Tirona St., Batangas City, The Philippines

Through  
**Lucy Davis**  
**Migrant Ecologies Project,**  
**Hiekkajaalanranta 1C 39, 00980 Helsinki**

May 2019

Dear grain of wheat inside my *nonoq* killed in seas near home,

Long salutation. And even longer: my preamble to why I think you reside, *in potencia*, in my own, perhaps also fossilized belly. I believe you might one day germinate. You have such agency.

See, my lover, A, descendant of Welsh farmers, inherited a bushel of wheat from his parents. A did not actually receive it until well after their joint, tragic demise. He did not open the airtight bushel until even much later than the time of receipt. It took years before A let air into the casket.

In any case, part of A's inheritance is knowing that wheat grains from archaeological sites thousands of years old, are known to have managed to still insinuate life upon meeting up with the future. They can be bread, still. Back in soil, they might shoot out a tendril to the sun. It strikes me as defiance of mortality. Or of time. Or of nihilism.

Like I said, A took his time about his, so to speak, wheat birthright; not rushing to reconcile wheat/life with wheat/death until he found a way that was not fore-ordained. He did find purpose for the trans-generational gift. He matter-of-factly ground handfuls of his ancestral wheat every morning, and made breakfast pancakes for years. It was my privilege to ingest cereal from a single Australian farm, farmed through their lives by A's migrant parents.

Grain of wheat, secreted in the reptile: you are quite the universe of possibility. Including the possibility—probability—of the next Aeon of Extinction. The domestication of your lineage 12,000 years ago helped bring us to the perdition, just around the corner, wrought by the Anthropocene so contemptuous of wild things. And yet you, puissant grain, now turn up in the belly of the beast, turning up the dial—not on the tenacity of life, but on the awesomeness of domestication.



**Marian Pastor Roces**  
Independent curator and writer on politics and culture  
Pastor Ancestral Home, C. Tirona St., Batangas City, The Philippines

I write you, tiny thing, about the vastest of matters. Cosmological scale is in-grained in you. Your germ plasm yielded to the taming ministrations of my species and foretold—could have fore-ordained—overpopulation, apocalyptic armies, and massive species extinctions from mono-cropping and deforestation so insane, the planet may not support human life for long. But yes, the cosmos will carry on without us.

Since you—with corn, barley, oats, millet, sorghum, rye, triticale, and of course, rice—altered entire ecosystems, I have to be in awe of your power. Still, you are singular among the cereals in the sheer scale of the capacity of wheat growers to produce and destroy systems both delicate and mighty. Indeed you are magic. Meso-American corn eaters may have built glorious, gory cultures and destroyed forests—and themselves—but they did not cultivate the audacity to conceive bombs that carry the code for nuclear winter.

You are in a special category of thing, agent, comestible, bomb, idea. That you should hide in a magnificent creature does not surprise me at all.

You've kept to yourself in that cavity for 130 years. That is about the same amount of time my family lived in a gorgeous wooden house built in 1883. We also kept to ourselves. It was possible because we are quite the huge clan; and we delighted so in a house that seemed big enough for all of our ancestors. Particular forms of life, nurtured in our respective cavities, thrive as actual, or virtual, or hypothetical, or conceivable realities, where myth conflates with history conflating with organic material.

My home is your animal. And if I might be so insolent, your animal is also mine. My claim was sounded earlier than my arrival on this heartbreaking earth. It emanates from dictionaries written by friars, translating into Spanish all collectible local words from various parts of their crown's *las islas filipinas*. They picked up a term I still know today. *Nonoq* (*nono* with a glottal stop) is ancestor.

But in the last 400 years, *nonoq* was recorded as the word for crocodile in my part of the world. The dictionaries plucked a speck of a galaxy of meaning. In those galaxies that preceded a paltry 400 years, very much earlier than those compendia, *nonoq* would have been uttered for millenia to invoke the crocodile/ancestor as phenomenology of the mystical.



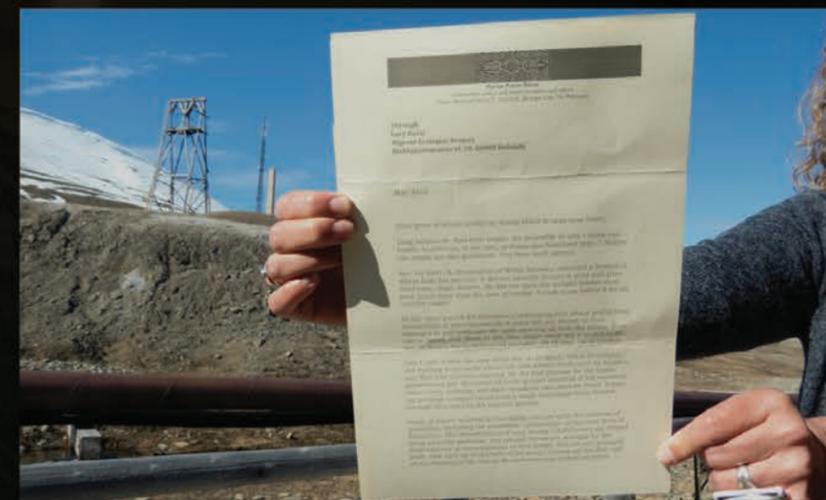
**Marian Pastor Roces**  
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Having implanted yourself inside my ancestor, I reel. The *nonoq* ingested you, but it is you who might live forever. Quickly rallying my wits about me, I avow: my crocodile, my home, my ancestor lived before the Mesozoic! And you, wheat, are a 19<sup>th</sup> century invention. Yes as a selected variety for monocropping. Sure you yielded to man in the Neolithic. But there is something truly (although admittedly self-) empowering in being aware of my *medusa oblongata* as the survival of the crocodilian in humans; and of a people who thought themselves descended from crocodiles.

Puny identity politics. This one-upmanship I indulge with a grain of wheat is ridiculous. Whatever fun I eke from the toils of cultural studies is ephemeral, as it well nigh should be. Whatever glee I reap from that thought of ingesting my lover and his entire civilization in my belly—the crocodile appears in island Southeast Asian textiles as sexuality and fecundity, often as female—dissolves into the liquid egolessness of love.

And identity politics dissolves into the humility needed to think of the planet itself, where reptiles and mammals and cereals *think* in the vocabulary of awe.

Marian



**Zachary Chan and Lucy Davis**

Previous pages: *Wheat Grain World Dreams*, June 2019. Background photograph of the interior of our crocodile by Kee Ya Ting, 2013. Singapore.

**The Migrant Ecologies Project**

*Letter from Marian Pastor Roces 2019*  
Inset: *Marian Pastor Roces' letter in Svalbard*

Dear grain and crocodile,  
I write you this letter with  
the new ink I made from pea butterfly  
flower the color of which has been  
changed over time - from purple, to  
blue, then to green... The paper is  
votive paper for Buddha, coming from  
Laos. And I'm going to  
write the letter in 20  
pieces, which I will

② number and arrange  
into the shape of a  
crocodile. I borrowed this  
pattern from an exhibition at the National  
Museum of Cambodia about Royal Funeral  
Ceremony in Cambodia in 2013, just after  
the death of King Norodom Sihanouk.  
The "Tang Krapeu" pattern is based  
on the white crocodile-shape banner  
hanging vertically which traditionally  
signaled funeral in Cambodia.

③ For the content of  
the letter, I'm going to  
send you some entries  
of a dictionary I've been working on.  
The working title of this dictionary is:  
"TỪ ĐIỂN XÁM-XANH VIỆT-NAM"  
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This dictionary is based on  
a novel, "Chuyện kể năm 2000"  
("A Tale of the Year 2000") by  
Bùi Ngọc Tấn, a Vietnamese writer

④ I met about 10 years ago who  
has passed away. This is an auto-  
biographical novel he wrote of his  
time -- from 1968 to 1973 (when I was  
born!) -- he spent in detention or  
labor camps in Northern Vietnam. The  
labor camps were normally located in  
deep valleys with mountains around,  
and in forests where prisoners would  
have to do hard labor for  
years. There were normally  
no terms for the detention

⑤ So the prisoners  
never knew when  
they will be released.  
In the novel,  
the writer described  
in details his life  
in the camps. But he also described the  
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① Hanoi 7 June, 2019  
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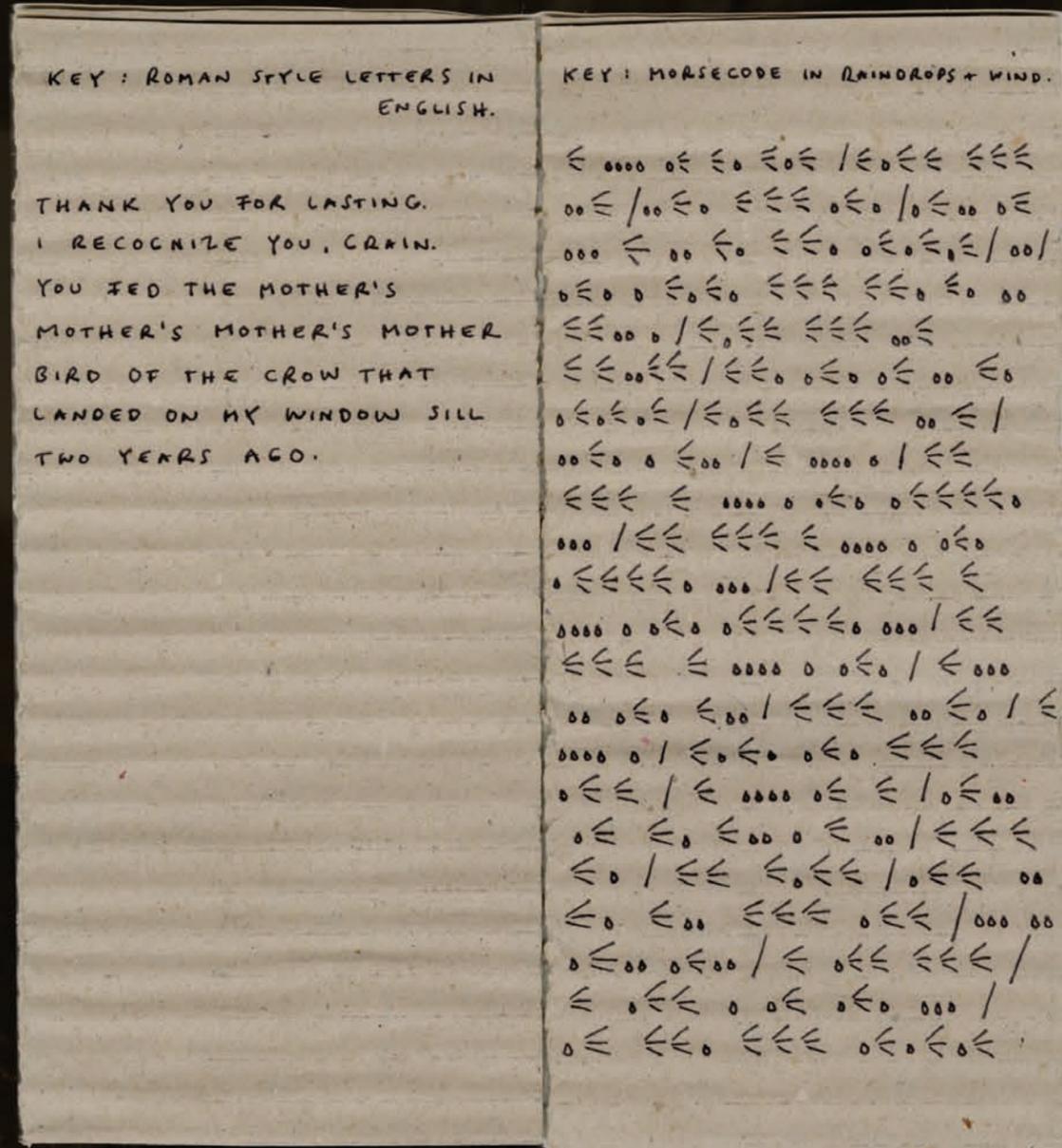
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Dear Grain of Wheat,

You were found in the belly of one of our kin, a crocodile in Singapore

Some call us crocodiles monsters. But who is the real monster here, you or us? What were you – a foreign grain of wheat – doing in Southeast Asia in the first place? Whether you came from India or Europe, your arrival in Southeast Asia was part of colonial project that was based on a monstrous idea: that white Europeans had a God-given right to rule the cultural and natural worlds of others. So consumed by the spirit of this idea were these Europeans that they killed by it and changed the world by it – bringing germs, and grains and steely-eyed civilization in its name. They also likely killed our kin crocodile in the spirit of civilization and progress, thinking they did good.

But we crocodiles know better. We are not monsters. We only eat humans when we are told to do so by the spirits. The people of Southeast Asia know this, too, and bring gifts in our honour. Indeed, we hear on the wind that the crocodile who ate you, the foreign wheat grain, might also have been a spirit crocodile, a crocodile possessed by the *datuk* spirit of Panglima Ah Chong. How ironic that you, a colonial world in a grain of wheat, should end up as the unintentional sacrifice to a spirit from the tin mines!

All this happened many years ago. Today, some people claim, desperately and against all sound evidence, that spirits are a thing of the past. But we are not. No, we spirit crocodiles roam the waters of Southeast Asia more than ever before. Today, we no longer eat grain; we demand our pound of flesh. We eat more people in Southeast Asia than anywhere else in the world today. The spirits of the ancestors and the sorcery of other people make us attack people, in anger about the way the world is going. We live in crazy times! That you can take to the ghostly bank in Svalbard!

Some spirit crocodiles of Southeast Asia

Nils Bubandt and Anna Tsing

**The Migrant Ecologies Project**

Previous page: Top - Letter from Nguyễn Trinh Thi. 2019  
 Bottom - Detail, pages 1 to 5 of Nguyễn Trinh Thi's 20 page letter.  
 This spread: Left - Letter from Harriet Rabe von Froreich, 2019  
 Right: Letter from Nils Bubandt and Anna Tsing, 2019

Dear Grain of Wheat,

Helsinki 31.05.2019

You have found your way to the labyrinth of intestines of a saltwater crocodile who lost their life shot over 130 years ago and later became an exhibited trophy: a taxidermy specimen included in the collection of the former Raffles Museum Singapore. In your vegetal being and folding of folds, as seeds tend to be, you have generously entered into an intimate relationship with your unaware and non/living host. And through this intimate belonging you became a part of a non/living ecosystem that has developed through narratives and stories attached to and unfolding from within the organic materialities of vegetal/ecological entanglements of entities.

In the times that most refer to as the Anthropocene and in the context of narratives on (human-centric) survival, your story stands in contrast with the Global Seed Vault Project, based in Svalbard, Norway, constructed as the ultimate insurance policy for the world's food supply, offering options for future generations to overcome the challenges of climate change and population growth. It will secure for centuries, millions of seeds representing every important crop variety available in the world today. It is the final backup! (cceptus.org); and ironically enough, flooded in 2017 as the permafrost melted.

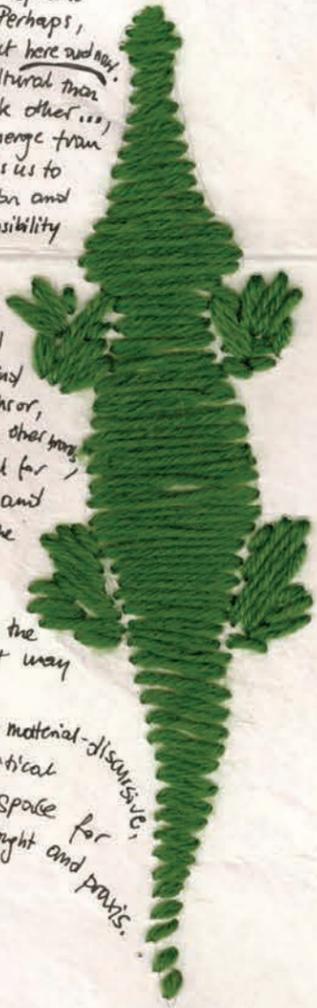
Yet, examples like the above-mentioned juxtaposition and stories of living/nonliving and human/nonhuman entanglements make us question "technology-will-save-us" scenarios and rethink our understandings of both natural/cultural heritage and ethics. Ultimately, preservation as the only goal, without taking a firm stance in relation to the cause of the disappearance of species (human population growth being one of them) will not lead us far. Perhaps, instead of focusing on a future, we should concentrate on and act here and now. Caitlin de Silveu in her own take on "palliative curation" of more cultural than natural heritage, emphasizes that "[u]pon encountering a vulnerable other... one is called on to act, but the appropriate action is allowed to emerge from the encounter, and it may be that our sense of responsibility leads us to attend to change and transformation rather than revert to perpetuation and preservation" (2017, 184). Perhaps, we should focus not only on responsibility for the preservation of life, but also on "acknowledging the end as an extended temporality that we already inhabit, rather than we are working to prevent", as Sarah Ehsor (2016, 51) reminds us.

Instead of indulging in speculative transhumanist scenarios aimed off the preservation of the human species at all cost, we should attend to what I call "terminal ecologies", where "terminality, following Ehsor, refers to a state, a practice, an intimate belonging, and a horizon; in other words, a "lifelong" (54) and shared condition, characterised by the potential for relations, non-linear temporality, and an ongoing responsibility for and accountability towards the harmed, the ill, the perishing, and the dead (environments, ecosystems, and organisms). In other words, we need ethics-politics as well as narratives and imaginaries informed by the fact that "our common present always exists in the wake of a complicated past, and ahead to a common future that may best be understood as an ongoing end" (Ehsor 2016, 55).

Dear grain of wheat: may your entangled story of material-discursive, geopolitical, sociohistorical, natural/cultural, economic, and ethico-political entanglements and transformations continue to catalyze a space for reflection, diffraction, and action in terms of both thought and praxis. Thank you for activating it!

Yours sincerely  
(in non/living companionship),

Mariette Rodan



To Grain of Wheat:

I am writing to you with a head full of fever, and body in shivers and aches. So, coherence in this letter, will be a luxury, if it can even be found in the first place.

I had the unusual honour of being one of the few people who found you, divined you, from the mass of golden wheat. Unpacking it was easy. It exploded onto the floor in rhythmic mounds. Peaks and valleys of yellow brown. Repacking it? That was whole other ordeal. It was like an amputation from eldritch creature. Each little strain of wheat was a miniature appendage trying to claw its way back out of the boxes we were forcing them into. Tiny springy tentacles, reaching for any air and freedom. Maybe the wheat knew what being trapped felt like for way too long. And it had had enough of boxes and the insides of crocodiles. Maybe it wanted the world again. Maybe, with all of its more-than-century-old dead memory, it wanted not just out, but revenge. Global apocalypse by wheat, that would be interesting.

And the sound. The light rustle that scratched your ears, and burrow deep into your brain. I couldn't tell if the sound was inside or outside my head. And it whispered what I can only assume to be memories and knowledge of the earth.

In the 1990s, some acacia trees in South Africa were producing tannin in leaves in very lethal amounts, enough to kill antelopes that grazed (and overgrazed) on them. That's not all. They would send chemical signals through the air to warn their plant neighbours to do the same. A silent rally cry to kill. What do wheat tell each other as humans keep reaping and consuming them? As the blades slice through them? Kill?

I just couldn't understand the language. Yet it kept whispering to my brain, taking root.

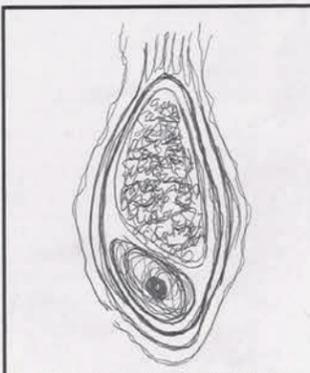
Dear seed, have you heard of the root-brain theory. It posits that the plant equivalent to the brain and consciousness, lie in its roots, being pushed deeper and deeper into the ground. (Is this an attempt to bury some dark forbidden knowledge?) While it displays its sexual organs to the air and the world and its pollinators. Like a topsy-turvy person.

And the dust. The great cloud of dust that breathed out of the body of wheat as our arms and fingers pushed in and pulled out of its mass. Dust, that burst out like the fog of spores of an agitated earthstar fungus. Dust, that potentially carried recollections of arsenic. Dust, that threatened to infiltrate the mouth and nostrils and infect the lungs. But to what end? To poison or gain control of the human body?

Thinking back, I don't recall the mass of wheat we handled to find you, had any roots. It was probably reaped with a blade. Like a mountain of decapitated topsy-turvy people with limbs still twitching and clawing as I tried to force them into boxes again. Decapitated topsy-turvy people with shrivelled and used sexual organs. And least we found you. One seed.

But one is enough. Though, more would have been better. Numbers matter sometimes. I'm not naive to that fact. More hours lived. More distance travelled. More genes maybe?

I read that there are about 26,000 genes in the human DNA. And the genome of rice? 50,000 genes. I won't pretend to fully understand the implications of that information. But here's what I've read: the more a living thing evolves, the more genes it has. Imagine, rice, more evolved than humans. And wheat? Last year, the International Wheat Genome Sequencing Consortium mapped over 107,000 genes in the wheat genome! Humans haven't evolved to feed off the sun and carbon dioxide, to devour nutrients directly from the earth. We don't have the genes for it. Who is more superior? It's not a competition of speed of evolution, we tell ourselves that so we can sleep better. As if it makes us feel less insignificant, less like a by-product, waste, and accident of the biological history of the universe.



I saw you stare at me when we found you.

You have travelled. You will travel again. You have been stored. You will be stored again. Will there be a third time? Or is this the third?

Yes, we tell ourselves, it is not a competition. Plants and animals, evolving in different directions. You, seed, wheat, plant, your kind have travelled further in your journey of evolution than we humans, animals, ever will.

I hate going to sleep when I am ill. The dreams I get then are cruel. Scientists have discovered the key compound in plants that induces them to rest. A plant equivalent of what we humans call sleep. Without this rest mechanism, they may die. Is there a plant equivalent to dreams? If there is, I hope you get cruel dreams too, dear seed. I don't mean any ill intent by that statement. It is with kindness that I say it because everyone should have cruel dreams. They are good for you. They keep you screaming alive.

I watched a documentary about plant consciousness once. An experiment was conducted, placing a pair of potted seedlings on their side, then refrigerating them for a weekend.

When the seedlings were let out into the world again, they began growing in a perpendicular angle. They remembered their positions. Plants remember. And the memory may feel real enough for their present to be affected by it. I had friend who passed away at the age of twenty-five. We had been friends for more than decade. Her name was Jaspreet Kaur Grewal. I wrote about her to a turtle once, a few years ago. There have been times when I would dream she was still alive. And my body remembers our hugs and how we connected. It would remember the familiarity of its reactions to her presence. Then when I wake up, it's as if, she died again. And that's death, really. It is once for the person, or being, or thing, or crocodile, or warrior, or wheat, that died. But for the those who remember them, their deaths happen again and again and again. I'm not sure at what point your version of memory began or will begin, I just hope it'll help you evolve.

I hope you will touch soil and water one day. And take your time. "Plant time" and "human time" are vastly different. Human time is confusing. Twenty-five years feel long yet short at the same time. Six years of post-loss feel like an eternity that is moving too fast. How is plant time like? Is it just as confusing? And how is "casuarina time" different from "wheat time"? Maybe one day, you'll evolve far enough to possess the ability to tell my kind the answers to these questions.

But take your time. Claim your time. Seize your time. When you touch soil and water, grow those roots waiting to burst out of you, with the violence of the flailing dead wheat erupting out of that box. Find and search for the weakest points in the soil. Take full advantage of them. Take full advantage of all weaknesses. Humans have weaknesses too. Take advantage of them too; soft flesh, open orifices.

and the first ones. Stretch down, and play the long game; humans are incapable of that, another weakness. Then, when you're ready, sprout out of the ground with a mighty scream of green, oh great seed, great serpent, great seed. Scream at the sun and clouds. Scream, not as babies scream, but as a panglima heading into battle and the Naga rising from the ocean in storm. Because you are no simple being. You are descended from something far more ancient. Your 107,000 genes stand testament to your evolutionary perfection. You are a god waiting to be born and worshipped, waiting to bless if you choose to. Or be feared. So, sprout and scream and stretch and begin your divine remembering life!

Root them all. Push through all weak points, and reach to the center of the world. Push through the millennia of detritus, pass the bones of the dinosaurs, pass the faecal remains of the old gods

But till that time comes, wait.

Play the long game.

The heart is baking in my skin and behind my eyes

I am unsure if I fell ill because of contact with the wheat or if I was already ill. Can't it be both?

Do you hear that? The rustling? The scratching scratch? The scratching scratch of your parents when I can't tell it's in the walls or within my skull. Can't it be both?

Right now, you are seed. And a seed is free. It's not rooted yet. Not bound to place. You are endosperm of complex carbohydrates and proteins, and germ of essential oils. You are hope of a possibility in shell. A "what could be." You will be placed in a vault till that time arrives.

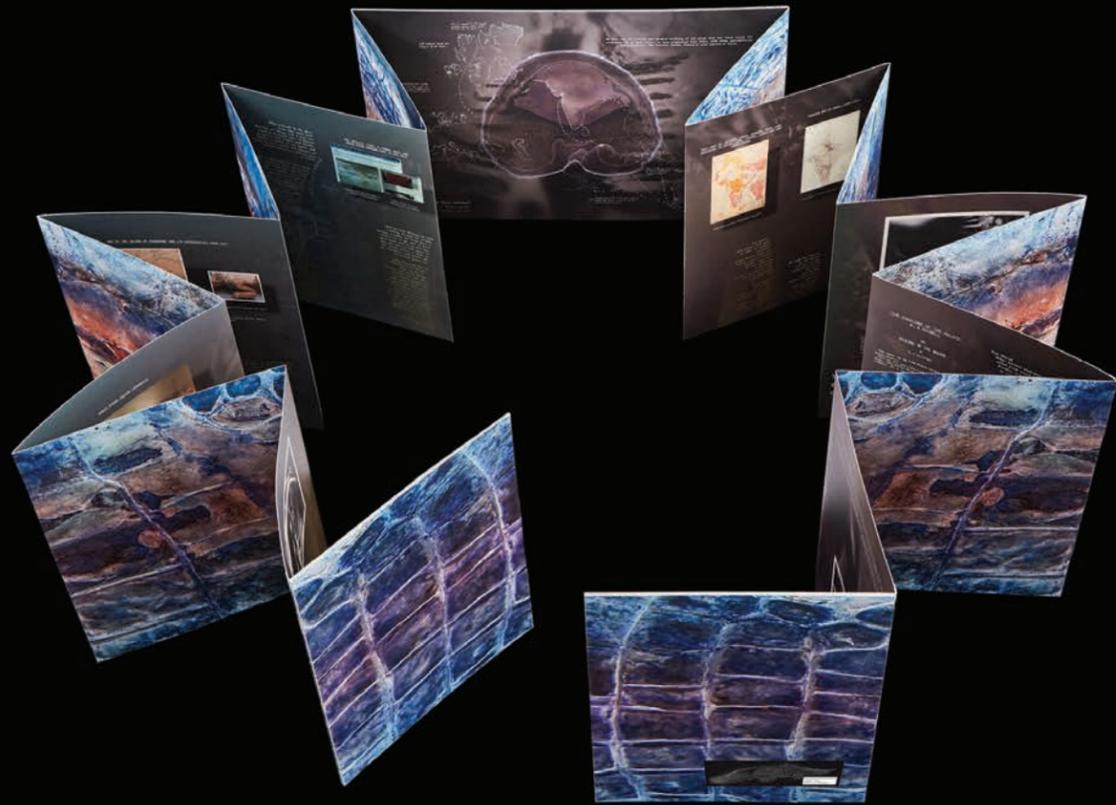
I know, dear, dear, seed, dear, grain of wheat, a vault is not a life. It is tied bag for wheat. It is a husk of dead crocodile. It is an acrylic box. It is darkness in a mountain. It is a coffin. No, a vault is not a life. It is, instead, a promise of one. So, I pray you may one day touch ground and water and the world be yours to tremble, oh, you beautiful eldritch creature. They won't know what to expect.

With love and respect,  
Muhammad Faisal Bin Husni  
25 May 2019

The Migrant Ecologies Project

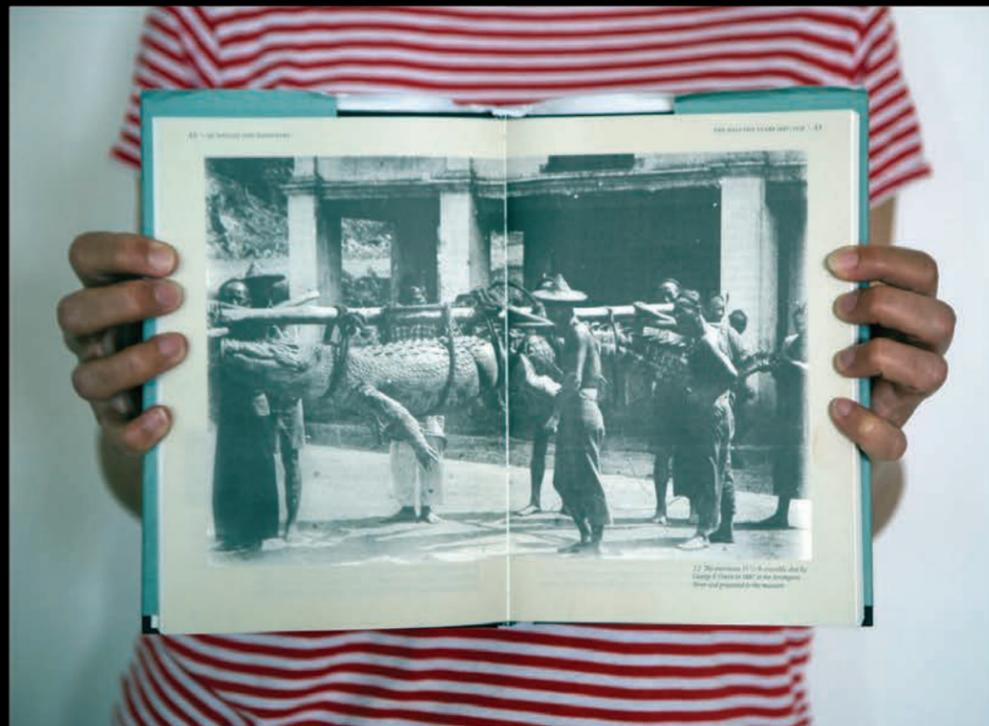
Previous page: Left - Letter from Marietta Radomska, 2019; Right top: Marietta Radomska's letter in Svalbard  
Right bottom: Gruve 3 Platåberget. Box with letters to the grain of wheat carried by Zachary Chan Photograph by Anna Laurent 2019  
This spread: Left - Letter from Muhammad Faisal Bin Husni, 2019

The artists pair footage of a sanctuary of endangered Puerto Rican parrots with that of the Arecibo Observatory, also in Puerto Rico. The Observatory's transmitter is used to broadcast messages into outer space in search of extra-terrestrial intelligence. The accompanying text, written from the perspective of the parrots, highlights the importance of listening as well as looking.



**Zachary Chan and Lucy Davis**

Top: A book the length of a crocodile. Photograph by Kee Ya Ting, Singapore, 2019  
 Bottom: Photograph of the crocodile on the day that they were killed in 1888. The original photographer, owner and copyright of this image remains unknown. Reproduced in Tan, Kevin, Y.L. Of Whales and Dinosaurs. The Story of Singapore's Natural History Museum.



augmented an existing, historic position as entrepôt trading post. A considerable increase in the number of sightings of, and attacks by saltwater crocodiles in the archipelago commenced with these incursions of colonial capital. This increase in encounters continues today; the outcome of the ongoing devastation of coastal ecosystems.

And yet is there not also a potential, equivalent scramble for the Arctic commencing right now as China, Russia and America all compete for the precious fossil fuels, metals, minerals and sea routes that are being uncovered as the ice melts? Incursions by polar bears into the town of Longyearbyen and attacks upon residents and tourists are now quite common.

Apparently, beings related to crocodiles did once swim in arctic waters.<sup>4</sup> Might Svalbard become the Singapore of the 21st century? And if so, what kind of worlds might this new entrepôt inherit?

**More Than 60 Letters to A Grain of Wheat**

Alongside the grain of wheat, an assemblage of eclectic offerings were also placed into Platåberget mountain mine shaft in Svalbard. Perhaps the most significant was an unruly collection of letters. These letters originated from a call that the Migrant Ecologies Project sent out asking for artists, writers and like-minded *natureculture* workers to write to this grain. In less than a month, we received over sixty letters to this one grain of wheat that had been inside a crocodile and that was going into a mountain in Svalbard (some writers chose to also write to the crocodile or to the spirit of Pang Limah Ah Chong).

Several of these letters are works of art.<sup>5</sup> We have scanned each letter and are issuing Certificates of Authenticity to the authors of each of these letters that were buried in the mountain. A website has been set up to archive these letters called [seeding-stories.org](http://seeding-stories.org).

And we are printing a selection of the most poignant of these letters here for the first time in Antennae. They are from: Marian Pastor Roces, Nguyễn Trinh Thi, Harriet Rabe von Froreich, Nils Bubandt, and Anna Tsing, Muhammad Faisal Bin Husni and Marietta Radomska

Together with the letters we also deposited in Svalbard Gruve/Mine 3 a 4.7 metre long concertina artist's book, the exact length of the crocodile. This book contains our own letters to the seed, the crocodile, the spirit and the mountain.

The letters and the book were buried deep in gruve 3, which is the site of the original Nordiska Genbank in Svalbard and an ongoing research experiment to determine how seeds survive or not in non-laboratory conditions under (what is hoped in future to still be) permafrost.

The introduction reads as follows:

You Platåberget, cousin of Meru, also called Mountain, also called 山, also called 脉, also called 脉, also called fjell, also called Pahara, also called Parbat, also called Parbata, also called...

We offer you this book.

A collage of fragments and whispers that we are tracing together, through a series of enclosures of possibility and waiting. All addressed to the heart of another dark sanctum. Your own.

We too have to work in the dark, at the start of what will of course be

far too short a time of reflection,  
upon far too short a time  
on this planet,  
for my people,  
when seen through that opening  
to your depth and stone.

We know very well we are crazy beginners  
—just amateurs really,  
tramping through the debris of capital and things  
that perhaps shouldn't even touch,  
but which have become intertwined,  
via the myriad ensnarements of power.

Our view in this book reads from inside  
of a different library  
to that world-famous seedbank you host.  
It's a view from within a salt water crocodile,  
killed 1887, at the mouth of the Serangoon River, Singapore,  
after which it became  
the largest croc specimen the Museum had on show.  
Then recently our crocodile was found to be filled,  
quite unusually, with wheat straw,  
from which, after searching for hours  
we were able to glean  
just one single grain.

We offer this grain to you now,  
with a wish to learn more  
of the worlds and the ways  
that might just be divined  
from the inside of wheat grains,  
and crocodiles,  
and mountains,  
with only  
that jumbled up toolkit  
of my people's histories  
and sciences and politics  
and poetries and magics and hope.

A continuation of our own research now involves the genetic profiling of other wheat grains that have since been found inside the crocodile straw as well as a series of other seeds and flower heads that appear to have been harvested alongside the wheat and likewise stuffed inside the crocodile.

A team of artists, musicians and historians brought together by The Migrant Ecologies Project and curator Sidd Perez from NUS Museum, will also be undertaking research in among other things, Taoist sites dedicated to Pang Limah Ah Chong, in Ipoh and Taiping, Malaysia once it is again safe to travel.

**The Migrant Ecologies Project** was set up by Lucy Davis in 2010 as an umbrella for collaborative, practice led, transdisciplinary research. It embraces concerned explorers, curious collectors, daughters of woodcutters, miners of memories and troubled entanglements. The project evolves through and around past and present movements and migrations of naturecultures in art and life in Southeast Asia. [www.migrantecologies.org](http://www.migrantecologies.org). All letters included in this portfolio can be read here: <https://seeding-stories.org/Writers-and-Collage>

