

Talk Forest Tales and Emerald Fictions

Monica Ursina Jäger

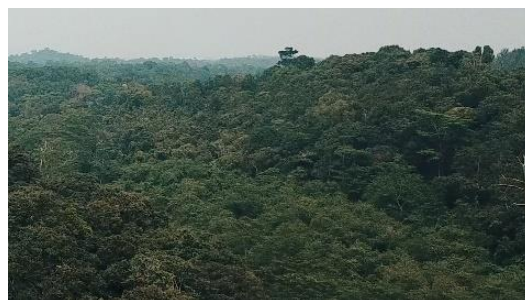
Video Documentation: <https://vimeo.com/showcase/10137105/video/837148560>

Transcript of the Presentation



The Island of Singapore, was once a hilly, densely forested place of tropical life. It has shaped my life and has itself shape-shifted. Singapore has stretched my family around the globe from Europe to Asia. Where as in one of my homeplaces the topography of the land was defined by steep mountains and deep valleys, the other home - Singapore - has lost most of its hills a long time ago. Occupied by foreign forces, and through endless excavation most of the forested hills have been replaced by skyscrapers: The lay of the land has been stretched like a blanket.

Today, a concrete crust extends in all directions. It creeps under the humid barks of the trees and through the remaining streams. The landscape has lost most of its forests, it has morphed into a vertical organisation of homogenized squares and lines.



But still, at the very core of the island, a primary forest remains. It did not fall victim to plantation or urban development. And it is through this forest, that I reconnected with my family and the lands that shaped parts of my biography.



Forest Tales and Emerald Fictions 2019 is a 3-channel video installation created during a residency of several months at the NTU Centre for Contemporary Art in Singapore. During this time, I spent the days in the remaining forest habitats, took long walks with my father, and talked endless hours with my stepmother Jennie about her childhood nature experiences. And in the studio, I created abstracted forest environments with Chlorophyll. From these encounters and interactions- with the forest and the city, with people and materials - this video collage emerged.

In the film we are accompanied by a narrator, a “revenant” across time, who travels with us from the dense skylines of the city, deep into the networks of the forest and back into a hybrid world of urban and natural environments. His character is an amalgam of voices through time, including biologists, anthropologists and philosophers, but also the forest itself.

We also get to know my stepmother Jennie Ching, a Chinese-Singaporean woman of Malay origin who talks about her very personal relationship with nature.



Today, many of the remaining forests in Singapore and beyond, are constructed and represented in anthropocentric ways. Forests have become both places of recreation and places of destruction. In both cases, urbanised humans are at the very centre: as seekers of relief or comfort, or as extractors and exploiters. We must not forget that centuries of colonization have shaped these habitats. By this I mean not only territorial claims, and economic extraction crimes, but also scientific systematization practices of natural habitats and biological bodies.

But to truly acknowledge the forest, is to encounter and experience it as an inherently ambivalent setting of matter and knowledge, as a place of constant transformation. Those who fully immerse themselves in the forest and dissolve into it, experience how time both expands and compresses, how spaces merge and blend. The past is simultaneously the

future, above is below, and countless spaces of possibility open up in the cavities of trees and root systems. Each tree becomes a biotope, roots and rooted beings speak to each other, and to us.

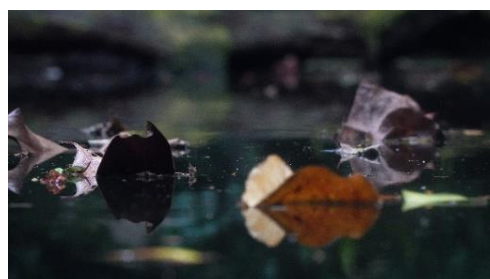
Forest Tales and Emerald Fictions, approaches the forest in an artistic-poetic sense. It is the very personal attempt to encounter the forest as a spatially complex structure, as an ecosystem of multi-layered relationships and interdependencies, and also as a place of imagination, narration, and memory.



In the film, we observe a green landscape painted with chlorophyll on paper. Working with chlorophyll for me I guess is an attempt to resist traditional methods of depicting and representing. Chlorophyll – that is the light-absorbing green pigment of leaves -- is a kind of essence and at the same time abstraction of the forest. Applied with gum Arabic and deposited on paper, it creates a kind of poetical space: It sediments, then dissolves with the rain and seeps back into the ground.



Are there ways of imaging and imagining beyond documentation and representation? Can images avoid extractivism? Can we – through conversation with the forest and stories of the forest - develop spaces that respect and foster ecological, cultural, and spiritual entanglements? Spaces that emerge in processes of transformation that could be called collaboration?



At one moment in the film, we are caught in a peculiar flow of movement: a community of leaves, insects, fungi, lichens and bacteria living in and on water. This community of life is indeed ancient and complex. Watching their dance, we do sense that the relationships between plants and pollinators, hosts and inhabitants, water and climate, have evolved over millions of years.

To encounter this community was indeed very moving. A year later, I went back to this pond and noticed that this magical underwater choreography of current and counter-current was still unfolding. From this, I created: *RETE Mirabile (counter-current)* 2020.



The ability to comprehend the world poetically is a gift and a language that can be learned and practised. It eludes logic and yet accompanies it. Creating art from this understanding honours the forces at work in nature, and respects the Western canon of science as well as the countless ideas of nature around the world.

So, my question is: Is the forest an invitation to learn with (instead of about)? Is the forest a collaborator to create images with (instead of from?) Is the forest the companion, with whom to practise to not to place human existence at the centre of the future, and to exercise our potential and ability as symbionts?



Instead of using the surface of the water as a mirror to reflect ourselves in it, we submerge ourselves in the water. For if we want to become part of something, we can no longer accept that nature is outside of us, outside of the polis, outside of thought. We cannot accept that nature means the non-human, the other, the external. Becoming with... (a term Donna Haraway has taught us) ... Becoming with... could then describe an artistic methodology that is not about the creation of images from nature, but a method in which new images are created in collaboration with nature.



In this sense: "Becoming with Forest" as a method could constitute a possible future: How can artistic interventions become projects of genuine learning and ongoing inquiry - without devolving into narcissistic self-reflection. How can we reconnect with the forests of our planet, interact with the trees and humus and with its animated puddles?

In this methodology we are talking about a sensing of the world from a different perspective, from the undergrowth up to the crowns, and back down to the mud. From the holes of cavity trees, to the mortar between the bricks. From the ancient voices that echo through both the forests and urban corridors, to the microbes and the old stories that transform the inanimate into the animate.



To envision new possibilities for life and knowledge, it may be necessary to imagine a future on or as a biotope tree. A future nested in the cavities of old trees and rooted in soil, but also in the poetry and myths of common ancestors, both arboreal and human.

It is after all, about a poetic translation of the perceptible world into a communal system. Nature, the artistic material itself, and other hitherto barely heard voices co-produce this transformation. The necessary poetological – or forestal - translations occur through listening and narration, through unexpected connections and relationships. They are created by directing light into previously unseen places, by translating sounds into images, ripples into patterns, smells into stories. In this “forestal” approach, possibilities open up for us to recognize each other again. These are brief moments in time, created collectively through art and beyond, that hold the promise of a better world.

Monica Ursina Jäger 2023

This talk was part of

GENDERS OF THE FORESTS

Master Symposium

As part of the symposium series *Gender and Equality in the Arts*

24 – 25 May 2023

Institute Art Gender Nature, HGK Basel FHNW

With contributions by Jumana Emil Abboud, Paula Baeza Pailamilla, Chiara Camoni, Gauri Gill, Pujita Guha, Monica Ursina Jäger, Pauline Julier, Gayatri Kodikal, Franziska Lauber, Alexandra Navratil, Claire Pentecost, Lucia Pietroiusti & Filipa Ramos, Mathilde Rosier, Ana Vaz, and Yvonne Volkart & Felipe Castelblanco

Moderated by Chus Martínez and Quinn Latimer

Video Documentation of the symposium: <https://dertank.ch/en/we-explore/gender-2/>