Writing in 1980, the late John Berger, in his well-known text *Why Look at Animals*, affirmed that, “the 19th century [...] saw the beginning of a process, today being completed by 20th century corporate capitalism, by which every tradition which has previously mediated between humans and nature was broken. Before this rupture, animals constituted the first circle of what surrounded humans”¹ (Berger writes “man” but I’ve taken the liberty to amend him, despite the fact that it would be a comfortable position, that of blaming the entire male gender for all the disasters committed by humanity). With less anthropocentric yet similar and equally dualistic arguments, Akira Mizuta Lippit sustains that “everywhere one looks is surrounded by the absence of animals. No longer a sign of nature’s abundance, animals now inspire a sense of panic for the earth’s dwindling resources. Spectral animals recede into the shadows of human consumption and environmental destruction.”²

Many follow these ideas and explore the equation of inverse proportionality that exists between the human transformation of a territory and the occurrence of moments of unexpected encounter with those beings that have been living and traversing it. Such an assumption is accompanied by the widespread notion that within this transformation nature is replaced by culture and self-regulatory, self-preserved, interconnected ecosystems give way to artificially organized, fragmented, and synthetic environments.

Bearing in mind these considerations, and considering the growing impact of human presence in all possible zones of interspecies contact, I'll follow Donna Haraway’s recent invitation to make kin and constitute refuges. She sustains that “our job is to make the Anthropocene as short/thin as possible and to cultivate with each other in every way imaginable epochs to come that can replenish refuge” [(defined as spaces and events that “make possible partial and robust biological-cultural-political-technological recuperation and recomposition”)] (...). “We need stories (and theories)—she continues—“that are just big enough to gather up the complexities and keep the edges open and greedy for surprising new and old connections.”⁵

I’ll attempt to follow Haraway using the path of art, focusing on the same animal, and telling three tiger stories that have diverse tones, rhythms, and lengths. I hope that my observations from these three episodes offer a glimpse of the hybrid terrains and zones of outlandish encounter that resist or simply ignore the above-mentioned dualistic simplifications (the nature-cultural, yin and yang), and which may contribute to constitute, reconstitute, and maintain these refugia—places of refuge—poetic and concrete zones that defy the everywhere desert portrayed by Lippit.
The first animal figure appears in a lithograph entitled *Unterbrochene Strassenmessung auf Singapore* (Road Surveying Interrupted in Singapore). To tell its story we need to summon three white European men (as in a bad joke): the German natural history illustrator Heinrich Leutemann, who made the original drawing of the engraving; the British Colonial agent Stamford Raffles, considered the founder of modern Singapore and who, in 1833 appointed the Irish civil architect George Drumgold Coleman as Superintendent of Public Works, Overseer of Convict Labour, and Land Surveyor of Singapore. The wood engraving depicts the moment when Coleman, together with a group of forced laborers, meet a tiger. This small print (20.8 × 29.4 cm.) is the first work visitors’ encounter when they enter the recently inaugurated National Gallery of Singapore. The work sets the tone of the curatorial approach to the hanging of the collection as a whole, which emerges as an attempt to explore the intertwining between artistic representation, historical contextualization, and mythical storytelling that surrounds the edification of the cultural identity of the Asian city-state. The tiger has played various, often contradictory roles in the territory’s historical geopolitical definitions, from being the symbol of the invasive-ness of Japan to embodying the communist menace to traversing the majority of the shamanistic accounts of human–animal transformative procedures. The tiger is also used to characterize Singapore’s present-day status, referred to as one of the four “Asian Tiger” economies (alongside South Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong). The strength of such imaginary is acknowledged by the museum via this print and the associations it establishes.

The image supposedly depicts an event that took place in 1835. Coleman was (according to his own words) “accompanied by a body of convicts [...] laying out a new road through a low swampy part of the jungle about four miles..."
from town [...] in the act of taking an observation through his theodolite when a crashing sound was heard among the bushes close by, and a huge tiger,” leaping from the thick and lush vegetation, surprised Coleman and the laborers. “Doubtless alarmed by the commotion occasioned, the animal immediately sprang into the jungle again and disappeared.”5 The lithograph shows the exact moment when the tiger leaps and meets the group. Some of the convicts lose their balance and fall to the ground, thus being deprived of their bipedal condition, one of the last remains to define their being human. Others seem to be less exposed to the menace of the animal by being under the shade of a parasol—dark, hidden figures who are protected by their quasi-invisibility: they are transparent even to the tiger’s gaze. Coleman is equally surprised, yet appears less troubled. He faces the tiger while his arm is being pushed back by a convict who is either falling down and holding on to him to keep his balance, or protectively moving him away from the animal. Amid this, a theodolite, a precision-measuring instrument, is on the verge of collapsing onto the ground.

With photographic accuracy, Leutemann represented this scene at the exact moment of in-betweeness, when everything is on the verge of happening, but while the final outcome is still undisclosed: the tiger hasn’t completed her leap; the humans haven’t yet been attacked; the theodolite hasn’t yet reached the ground; and the jungle’s vegetation hasn’t been cleared, cut, and flattened to render visible the particular topography that is about to be “mapped, itemized, measured, inscribed, transcribed, and triangulated.”6

There are still no names or numbers associated to this language-free landscape; no map or guide can orientate Coleman and his team. Only the tiger seems to possess a map, made out of smells, textures, and temperatures more than of visual reference points. Coleman is there precisely to capsize such natural measurement of space, to ensure that people will be able to orientate themselves better than tigers. What we observe here is the exact moment of the transmutation of the site into another rendering of it, albeit not necessarily a clearer one. As Bruno Latour suggests, “according to our land surveyors the difference between a tropical jungle and a concrete one is not that big. One gets lost in both: in the former due to a lack of landmarks and in the latter due to an excess of signs, nails, posts and marks that one has to learn to distinguish.”7

Returning to the lithograph, an attentive look at the agitated party reveals that the tiger doesn’t seem to be as interested in the group of men as it is in the theodolite they carry. The delicate and expensive topographic measuring tool for calculating the angles of horizontal and vertical planes represents the progress of modern science and its association with colonialist explorations (mapping and measuring to legitimize control). Could this interpretation be led by an artistic error, in which Leutemann—who certainly wouldn’t have observed many living tigers in his lifetime and even less in the wild—inaccurately directed the animal’s gaze toward the instrument rather than toward the individuals? Or could this be instead a representation of the animal’s intuition, the tiger’s sixth sense telling her to destroy the greatest threat to her survival, as the measuring and mapping device stands for everything that will flatten and transform the jungle where she lives? This argument—which has been thoughtfully developed by Kevin Chua in his article “The Tiger and the Theodolite”8 and imagined by the artist Ho Tzu Nyen in his video work Play of Shadows from Ten Thousand Tigers (2014)—allows for the inversion of the dialectics
of the encounter between humans and nonhumans and the consideration of the fact that interaction isn’t exclusively a human initiative. It might well be that it was the tiger who took the decision of appearing to the group, a theory that recognizes the intentionality and agency of the animal. I would even argue it is likely that we are observing a representation of an animal’s fascination for an unknown moving object, an instrument of mapping and surveying that enters a threshold contact zone, which 150 years later continues to be interpreted in popular culture as an attack. Many may be familiar with this gesture, made popular by online channels like YouTube, which hosts a large number of “drone animal attacks,” videos and compilations that attest to the interest of various animals in intercepting, capturing, and keeping the unmanned aerial vehicles that traverse the air around them. This reading would offer a very different interpretation of Leutemann’s image, suggesting that instead of attacking and attempting to push the mysterious mechanical creature backwards, the tiger might well be curious and attracted to it.

It is clear that animals, which until that moment had been unseen start manifesting themselves during this period of land transformation. Despite the fact that tigers have lived in the Malaysian Peninsula for millennia, the first extant record of the presence of a tiger in the territory of Singapore dates from 1831. This news reports that “tigers are beginning to infest the vicinity of the town [...] not many days ago, the friends of a Chinese woodcutter [...] discovered the head, and part of one leg of their companion in the thicket not far distant from the rear of the Chinese temple which lays near the road leading to New Harbour, and [...] marks of a tiger’s feet were plainly indented in the ground, round about the spot.” In the years that followed, there were similar news and accounts of complaints from workers and citizens, who felt that “the population of Singapore is really being converted into food for tigers, and the inhabitants are departing as regularly as steamers.” They also expressed their concerns about the “rapid depopulation of Singapore by tigers,” and their fears “that the ‘evil will go on increasing’”—or in other words—that the “population will go on diminishing.”

This news reveals the existence of a zone where the opposite of what had been theorized by Berger, Lippit, and others occurs. At a certain moment in the process of modernization that led to a widespread urbanization and/or ruralization of areas that had been previously occupied by humans, there was an inevitable rise in interspecies encounters. These weren’t always peaceful or necessarily triggered by human scientific curiosity or economic interest in other species, but were often shaped by the attraction these animals had to humans and their objects. Such an inverted relationship also opens the way for the conception that culture is indistinguishable from nature, or that one human’s culture is another tiger’s nature and vice versa. Anna Tsing points out to the need to maintain places capable of sustaining a “reworlding in rich cultural and biological diversity,” capable of sustaining the rebirth of forms of refuge for humans and nonhumans alike. Appearing and then disappearing, as described in Coleman’s account, the tiger returns to her material refuge zone. She also returns to an immaterial refuge, embedded in a ghostly aura. The concrete presence of the animal in these territories has been sublimated and re-emerges in various allegorical phantasmagorias, which recuperated the traditional myths that sustain the possibility of humans and the nonhumans alike, to traverse their respective ontological confinements and become other.
It is precisely in this period that weretigers, werewolves, and werejaguars found their way from the ages of time across the pathways constituted by Victorian anxieties and passions for the supernatural, the bestial, and the uncanny, haunting the bad conscience of the imaginary of the colonialist with an irrational fear for the other, which leads us to a ghost story, set in the same geographical area but more than a century apart.

**Apichatpong Weerasethakul, *Tropical Malady*, 2004**

Narrating the love affair between two young men in provincial Thailand, Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s film *Tropical Malady* (2004) is divided into two main segments. While appearing to establish a counterpoint between rural-urbanity and jungle, civilization and wilderness, medicine and magic, the tame and the wild, the film’s first and second parts reveal the interconnectedness and inextricability of these ecologies. At the same time, they explore the unique potential of cinema to act as a basin for encounters between technology, narrative, and animality.

The first part of *Tropical Malady* is marked by the encounter between a young farmer, Tong (played by Sakda Kaewbuadee), and a soldier, Keng (Banlop Lomnoi), whose fondness for one another ambiguously moves between friendship and sexual attraction. Their relationship evolves in their domestic spheres, in a social context that largely ignores privacy or secrecy, as parents, colleagues, neighbors, and friends partake of the duo’s growing fondness for one another. There are also new terrains that the couple explores together: an open-air karaoke, where vernacular music provides a beautifully awkward moment of intimacy as Tong sings a romantic song for Keng; the darkness of a movie theater; and a natural cave, which the two explore uneasily.

The second part of the film depicts the two men’s quest for one another. Their relationship evolves to a gradual crescendo where the tensions that connect attraction and repulsion, desire and fear, human and nonhuman, are fully explored. This second part is set in a forest with vegetation so thick that barely any sunlight reaches the ground. The scenes are set in near

![Image](Kick the Machine Films, film still from *Tropical Malady*, 2004)
total darkness (a characteristic of Weerasethakul’s signature as a filmmaker), creating a visually demanding and hallucinatory experience for viewers, as there is little distinction between what is seen and what is imagined, between day and night, or before and after. Our perceptual means and those of Tong and Keng are challenged and exposed to the effort of adaptation, in an attempt to regain the capacity to establish any sort of orientation.

It is in this environment that Tong—ambiguously incarnated into a shaman who turns into a weretiger—exists across the boundaries of man–animal–ghost, inviting Keng to join his world. Tong’s new animal body allows for the consummation of a pre-existing affective and sexual bond that exists beyond species (human and tiger); laws and customs; and time (beyond life and death, past and future).

It is the dislocation of the action to the site of the forest that allows for this relationship in potency, which evolves in the first part of the film, to open itself and be fully articulated. In such open, unmappable terrain all of the couple’s dialectics can be dismantled and scattered, and their individual ontologies can be decentered and diluted. The forest is a welcoming place for this explosion of self to happen due to its indifference: neither hostile nor protective, neither regulated nor chaotic, here is where Tong and Keng become neither owners nor foreigners, located as they are in a place that is indifferent to time, morals, ethics, or language.

The only moments of verbal exchange during this second part of the film happen outside the human, via third figures. One such moment occurs by way of a machine, a walkie-talkie used by Keng to communicate with his fellow soldiers, which transmits disembodied voices and scratched sounds that buzz like mechanical insects. These noises, more concrete than those of the jungle, enhance the separation between Keng and his patrol, and his own vulnerability and helplessness. Another occasion is presented not through spoken words but via a written text: subtitles appear on the screen to translate what a small macaque, perched on a tree, tells Keng: “The tiger trails you like a shadow”—the monkey says (25’36’’)—“his spirit is starving and lonesome. I see you are his prey and his companion. He can smell you from the mountains away, and

Kick the Machine Films, film still from *Tropical Malady*, 2004
soon you will feel the same. Kill him and release him into the ghost world or let him devour you and enter his world." A creature traditionally located halfway between humans and the other animals, the monkey sustains that Keng has to make a decision: either he turns the animal into a spirit or he allows his humanity to be embodied within the tiger by letting it eat his flesh. However, Keng seems to be capable of doing more than that, as he devours the tiger’s soul. Together, as one, they are neither human nor animal and are finally released into each other.

There is a sense of correspondence between cinematic time and real time in this second part of the film, which lasts for about an hour, giving the viewer the impression of accompanying the action live during its entire length. At the same time, as the tension between the two lovers grows into a feverish hallucination, viewers find themselves immersed with them in the jungle, induced to a state of suspension: there is no outside here, no distance, no sense of control. The decentering is common to everyone engaged in this moment. It goes as far as decentering cinema’s intrinsic relationship to the visual, as the film’s outcome happens through sound and not images, when a spoken message leads to the film’s denouement: “Every drop of my blood sings our song, a song of happiness. There, do you hear it?” The two creatures are finally one, their unified blood rejoicing in their completeness. Meanwhile the camera slowly pans across the vegetation, moved by the wind, and the dark images resume to black.

**Phillip Warnell, *Ming of Harlem: Twenty One Storeys In The Air* (2014)**

The third case of interspecies encounter is framed within an urban yet no less outlandish context and is brought by Phillip Warnell’s film, *Ming of Harlem: Twenty One Storeys In The Air* (2014).

Between 2000 and 2003, Antoine Yates lived with Ming, Al, Shadow, and other less permanent guests in a twenty-one-story public housing complex in Harlem, New York City. Antoine Yates was then a thirty-seven-year-old North American citizen; Ming a three-year-old, 500-pound Bengal tiger, which Antoine had bought when he was still a cub from an Animal Park in Minnesota; Al is a seven-foot-long alligator, also acquired through Yates’ contacts with exotic-animal dealers and breeders; and Shadow is a black-and-white domestic cat. Other former occupants of the house include children taken into custody by Yates’ mother (the seven-room apartment was a registered foster home), and some short-term tenants. *Ming of Harlem* presents detailed portraits of Antoine, Al, Ming, and the space they shared, at moments accompanied by Jean-Luc Nancy’s response to the film, a long poem entitled “Oh the Animals of Language” (2012).13

In October 2003, Yates sought treatment at the Harlem Hospital for what he claimed to be a pet pit bull bite. Because the width of the bite marks suggested an animal with a much larger jaw, the medical personnel alerted the authorities and while Yates was being treated, the police was sent to his home. Hearing loud growling noises from the apartment, the officers feared letting themselves in through the door and thus set up a rope sling from an upper floor to access the apartment through the window. While a police was suspended in the air, Ming went to the window and tried to attack him. An animal-control team was then sent to the apartment and a sharpshooter rappelled down the side of the building and shot the tiger with tranquilizer
darts. Agent Martin Duffy's account of his experience with the tiger combines a myriad of emotions, ranging from optimism and serenity to vigilance, terror, and awe:

I was pretty comfortable until I heard him roar—incredibly, incredibly loud. I’m not gonna lie—you have to be pretty nervous. This is a 500lbs tiger at the top of the animal chain. You just have to suck it up and be a man. When I saw him, he was laying down, real peaceful. Then he looked at me, ready to make a move. I took a shot and I hit him in the hind,—and that’s when he went berserk. Initially he charged away and when he hit the interior wall, I could feel the outside wall of the building shaking, that’s how powerful he was. Then he turned around and just charged at the window. All I saw was his giant head with a mouthful of giant teeth coming at me. That’s when I was like, ‘All right, I’m going to be eaten by a tiger.’ He was magnificent—this beautiful fur, an amazing creature.\[14\

It was only when the apartment was accessed that the alligator and cat were also discovered. In consequence, Ming, Al, and Yates all found themselves behind bars: the tiger was sent to an animal sanctuary in Ohio, the alligator to an animal shelter in New Jersey, and Antoine was convicted of reckless endangerment and served a three-month prison sentence.

Rather than exploring the ethical and legal consequences of keeping wild animals as pets inside an apartment in a large city, *Ming of Harlem* operates a visual and tactile investigation of what it means to be close to these animals by presenting long shots of their skin, fur, and movements. This emphasis on the animal’s body introduces a cinematic reconstitution of the relationship between these three individuals, a restorative mourning for their mutual loss.

In parallel to such visual ritual, Warnell questions how this situation was sustained by imagining how man and animal negotiated their cohabitation within the space of the house they shared. This house was simultaneously an enclosed domestic environment—a functional place of residence with
no green area and no open contact with the exterior; a territory that was defend-
ed by the animals against its invasion by another animal, and therefore what in zoology is called a home range: an area that animals regularly cross to fulfil their needs; an enclave—an isolated parcel surrounded by a larger territory whose inhabitants were culturally, ethnically, and biologically different, a not-so-
secured area within another not-so-secured area—and a blank spot, which was organized according to its own laws and evaded any control or surveillance, and in that sense, a den, a hidden, private hideout.

In this house, Yates and Ming are folded into each other, in a relationship of interdependency, sharing their solitude and isolation and establishing a form of companionship that Yates expresses in deeply affective and emotional terms. Throughout the film, Yates appears seated in a car that is circulating the streets of New York. Filmed from outside the vehicle, Yates looks through the window and talks about what he sees, recalling moments and places. The car keeps him in a confined space, separating him from the city, while traversing it; locked inside this aquarium-like structure, Yates also becomes the subject of scrutiny.

Concurrently, Warnell conceived another device for inquiring further upon the relationship between the animal and the confined space, generating an experiment in which a scale (1:1) replica of the house was built inside a tiger's territory in a zoo. The footage that documents the tiger's relation to the space constitutes a substantial part of the film. The extended periods over which Warnell shows how the tiger is interacting with the house—walking across it, rubbing himself against it, spraying it, scratching it, filling it with sounds—makes clear that there is no form of separation between the two: the house, which had already been a cross-border location for man and tiger, offers itself as a space of permeability of animal–space boundaries.

Neither domestic nor wild, neither helpful nor harmful, neither pet nor pest nor beast, Ming appears immune to the consuetudinary classifications that locate this animal within a network of roles and symbols. Yet the tiger wasn’t simply socially incorporated as a member of the household: he became the house, and the house became the tiger, impregnated with his presence, odors, excretions, substances, gestures, uses. With his presence, the tiger naturalized the space; the house became as determined and subjugated by the

Phillip Warnell, film still from Ming of Harlem: Twenty One Storeys in the Air, UK, 2014
architecture as by the animal, who was deeply implicated in its decay, corruption, collapse, and undermining. This space actively produced an indeterminate instability, as attested by Yates’ neighbors from the floor below, who complained about having infiltrations of urine in their walls. At the same time as this space was outside legislation, measurability, and power, it was also filled up and superimposed by the animal; it had the animal within it.

Apartment 5E was infused with the tiger’s sweet and acidic odors; some say the spraying of the tiger smells like buttered popcorn, some say that it smells of basmati rice. This space was the set for a relation between bodies and bodies, bodies with different configurations: not only between human bodies and animal bodies, but also between living bodies and objectual bodies, somehow indistinct from one another. This house broke the notion that nature corresponded to a wild animal’s world. The relationship between the house and Ming pushed Haraway’s notion of the daily practice of inter-subjectivity between animal and human toward a recognition of a relationship that is established between living and non-living, in which ownership and control are operated, not by possession or education, but by permeability. This was a space that smelled of basmati rice and of buttered popcorn; a house that roared, moaned, hissed, growled, and chuffed.

The episode of a tiger fascinated with technology; the story of a human–tiger–spirit whose blood sings with joy; and the portrait of a tiger-house that roars. In three different manners, these artworks suggest modes of spatial and interpersonal engagement that stand at the crossroads of cultural and environmental concerns, and which question the fundaments of the ontological divide between the human and the nonhuman.

Their unique gestures potentially constitute the poetic and concrete places of refuge to which Haraway refers, and introduce the possibility that not only humans but also other creatures are capable of generating them. However they also exhibit the ambivalence of these zones, which are stuck between the need to preserve for the future and the perpetuation of a dynamic that can only exist in a limited temporality: a refugia is only a starting point, it should never be a permanent dwelling. What comes after the space of refuge? And, more importantly, how can these areas be expanded to turn them into normalized environments where the making of interspecies kin becomes a normalized gesture?

By simultaneously celebrating and mourning these creatures, and by exemplifying their being stuck between the recognition of their agency and the artistic projections set upon them, art at the same time is embracing and further complexifying these idealistic modes of making kin. It is also attesting to its own capacity to become a privileged site for interspecies encounters and aggregations, which are, now more than ever, fundamental for the all-still-possible earthly survivals.


4. The new National Gallery of Singapore opened on November 24, 2015, across two iconic colonial buildings of the city-state, the Supreme Court, and the City Hall.


9. The Singapore Chronicle and Commercial Register, September 8, 1851, p. 3.


14. As reported in "The 500lb tiger encountered by police after they were called to a tiny high-rise flat," The Daily Mail, October 9, 2010.