The Migrant Ecologies Project

Railtrack Songmaps Roosting Post 2

At the tangled heart of “Railtrack Songmaps Roosting Post 2” were birdsongs and stories from Tanglin Halt, one of many old neighborhoods in Singapore slated for en-bloc redevelopment in recent years. Among the earliest public housing estates, Tanglin Halt is home to thickets of nonhuman and human histories, gradually eroded by the city-state’s incessant appetite for redevelopment. On the neighborhood’s fringes, the disused railway tracks—one of the last infrastructural reminders of Singapore’s pre-separation bonds with Malaysia—have been removed, while the gardens that once mushroomed in these liminal patches have been tamed into sleek lookout decks and trails.

But to merely glean anti-developmentalist advocacy from “Roosting Post 2” would miss the point. Rather, by foregrounding interspecies conversations through moving image, sound, and installation, the exhibition revealed the polyphonies in human-nonhuman relations. The Migrant Ecologies Project, comprising Lucy Davis, Kee Ya Ting, Zachary Chan, and Zai Tang, interwove field recordings of birdsong with the voices of Tanglin Halt residents, experts, and nature lovers, as well as competitive bird photographers and poachers.

Following from the first iteration, a celebration of the neighborhood in its final days staged at a Tanglin Halt community center, “Roosting Post 2” at Jendela was guided by practices of salvage, borrowing anthropologist Anna Tsing’s concept. Salvage begins by recognizing that life goes on amid ruins. Confronted by human and environmental loss, the Migrant Ecologies Project engaged in memory work while refusing to offer any utopian solution, leaving the loose threads untied.

Although all artworks are drawn from the same nature-culture archive, each approaches the material on different tangents. Entering the exhibition, one might begin with Like Shadow Through Leaves (2020), a loose-leaf collection of manila folders containing interview transcripts and photographic plates of particular bird species. Visitors would recall these stories as they flipped through the delicate chapbooks nested in the drawers of Sun Box Bird Book (2017/2020—). With the series Bird People Assemblages (2017/2020—), memory is iterated by processing archival and photographic materials through drawing, linocut, and embroidery. In salvaging these interspecies memories as fragments, they escape the embalming capture of archival authenticity, casting light on their knotted, living qualities.

The works are also acts of dedication. Each collection of reworked archival material in Bird People Assemblages honors a key interviewee. Suspended from an elaborate rig of tree branches, the works double as shadow puppets, animated by the motion of kinetic lights. Their fleeting shadows move in and out of legibility, akin to difficult memories that spill beyond any singular image. The exhibition itself is dedicated to the memory of veteran conservationist and bird-call-virtuoso Subaraj Rajathurai. Recordings of Subaraj’s calls and avian rejoinders were mixed by Zai Tang into a reverberating soundscape that confronted visitors with its dignified interspecies duet.

In “Roosting Post 2,” grief was accompanied by the liveliness of memory. In the cavernous room-size installation Railtrack Songmaps Nest-Infestations (2020), the architectural model of Tanglin Halt’s now-demolished chap lau chu (ten-story house)—a once-common public-housing typology from the 1960s—seems to float despite its cumbersome appearance. Unlike monuments that ossify the past, the installation keeps memory alive through creating a cinema of entanglement, immersing visitors in myriad bird-human encounters. The enveloping agglomeration of plant matter, nests, waste, and media equipment gestures at the unruly contradictions behind these unreliving stories.

Ecological grief here arose from both human and nonhuman loss: a neighborhood, an ecology, a stalwart of the nature community. With “Roosting Post 2,” the Migrant Ecologies Project revealed that it is neither concerned with reifying loss through memorialization nor proposing to move on through solution-finding. Instead, it takes as points of departure the unraveling tangle, the felicitous encounter. To mourn is to hold onto entanglement. These songs and stories recall an avian feeling, the sensation of gliding through the clouds along a line of flight never untethered from others.

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