

A Letter from the Zoo: Reflections on a Simulated Mobility

Singapore, 6 August 2020

Dear M,

Today is my birthday and it is the first time in years that I am not travelling anywhere. Celebrating my special day during the summertime always implies for me being on a holiday, somewhere abroad with family or friends. Every year it is unique, depending on the place and our celebratory mood. A lemon pound cake is usually the only constant, and me feeling light-hearted and loved. This year everything is different and strangely special: no travel, no family, and also a different cake. It is round, blue and crowned with dreamy clouds and a rainbow, naively evoking an imaginary utopian place while a pandemic ravages the world.

I have been thinking about mobility, its manifestations and representations, since you raised the topic in our last conversation and would like to share some thoughts in this letter. Epistolary exchange was actually one of my first tangible experiences of mobility—besides family travels and TV. Sending a message from one place to another, to people I knew and also strangers, always felt so exciting. Pen pal correspondences, chain letters, holiday postcards, it was a beautiful pastime that connected us to each other and the world. Sharing such personal fragments of experiences in short impressionistic notes was always largely sufficient to imagine the rest. The world was surprisingly complete before it got professionally globalised.

Being a woman of my time, I travel frequently and often alone, visited five continents and over 50 countries. I have always been naturally drawn to the South and the East and enjoyed (Hitchcock's) *North by Northwest* as a film. When I am asked what I prefer in life I like to answer, "being in between," neither here nor there. I feel best in environments where cultural references are multi-layered and interchangeable, thereby offering authentically diverse perspectives on our existence. I spend a lot of time in such boundless, oneiric spaces—between worlds and times. They are my natural habitat.

A space that particularly interests me in this regard is the zoo. Its evocative and artificially constructed wilderness has always fascinated me and in this moment of enforced stillness, where travelling has receded into the distance, it fascinates me even more. It makes it an ideal destination for my birthday this year, not only to let the mind journey

freely to faraway and adventurous places but also to contemplate the dynamics of a complex and mutually inflicted immobility. Humans and animals know how to immobilise one another. Their relationship has always been ambivalent and defined by natural instincts, mechanisms of attack and defence, exploitation, captivity, protection, the conquest and definition of territories and rules that are better not transgressed.

Humans' aspiration to dominate animals has a long history which is, inter alia, exemplified in the institution of the zoo. When zoos opened in the mid-18th century their purpose and evolution paralleled that of museums with the display of exotic exhibits from local and faraway places that served for zoological studies, public instruction and entertainment. Like museums they have become important sites of social activities and tourist attractions, and while caging animals continues to be a highly controversial phenomenon, zoos are also indispensable facilities for wildlife research and species conservation, at least here in Singapore.

End of last year we witnessed a peculiar zoonosis when a deadly infectious disease jumped from an animal to a human and from there to many other humans around the world, to 19,238,910 by now, to be precise. The interdependence between the virus' extreme mobility and humanity's immobility in an effort to contain its spread is logical but unseen on such a large global scale, and therefore emotionally unsettling. The situation went literally viral when its rapid moves—appearances and disappearances in unpredictable waves—invisibly and inexorably colonised the earth. In the search for remedies, animals will paradoxically also be the ones saving us—mice and macaques, our favourite guinea pigs, what would we do without you?

The complex nature of anthrozoology seems to somehow echo my own psychological entanglement with the challenging circumstances of the moment. Moreover, the urge to visit the zoo today resembles the critical impulse of taking a photograph, to frame and freeze a situation in time and space—not without considering the before and after—as well as what is outside the frame. When taking a picture, I search for a visual situation that can hold and express my feelings. And I have this strong intuition that the zoo might provide exactly this and give some answers to what I am unconsciously searching for: maybe simply feelings of solidarity and the consolation of a shared destiny, or an instinctive connection that might trigger ideas of resistance and strategies of escape—at least through imagination.

The trajectory from home to the zoo feels like a trip around the globe. Travelling 20 kilometres on a tiny island is indeed half of our current world. The 50 km from East to West and 27 km from North to South with 193 km of coastline around is all we have since the travel restrictions kicked in six months ago. The dense traffic on the highway is insane. Drivers are nervously zigzagging around, desperately trying to reach their destination as fast as they can. It evokes a feeling of nostalgia. Until only a few weeks ago we were all ordered to stay at home and the activities outdoors were rare and purposeful. During that time, we became silent observers of nature's grandiose spectacle, which was both fascinating and in contrast alarming. The skies were azure blue, the clouds snow white, the grass spring green, the air pure and the city

calm—it felt like a different place all together with highland and tropical features combined.

The standstill positively forced us to focus our attention, be stationary and in the present. Time was elastic and slow. My personal experience of the situation was drastically amplified when the virus disabled me for almost a month in a 12 square meter hospital room. It was a trip on its own and the acute awareness of time and space has never left me since. In fact, moving freely through the city now and having 721.5 million square meters to physically explore, feels like an incredible spatial expansion. It resonates strongly with the movements of my mind which, for its part, has always been free and never stopped taking me to unexpected places.

I arrive just in time to check in with my designated group of 2pm visitors. Our gestures are henceforth automated and we know exactly what to do: I take the phone out of my bag, check-in with the SafeEntry online app, get my temperature checked, scan the barcode of my ticket, scan the QR code for the zoo map, put the phone back into my bag, give the doorman a friendly nod while his mask-muffled voice wishes me an enjoyable visit.

I am excited to finally be inside and think that washing my hands would not be a bad idea after the taxi ride. I always had a fascination for public transport seats' egalitarian function but in the current context, moving around is inevitably paired with a latent anxiety. The zoo's outdoor washrooms are an attraction by themselves. With their abundant foliage and chirping insects they are a veritable tropical marker and good start of my tour. As I venture into the fictional wild, I encounter some sleepy alligators, shy tapirs, hot deer-pigs and a deceptively real-looking dinosaur. Every few seconds his mouth opens and closes mechanically, and I wonder why we need a Jurassic Park totem in the zoo. Yet I have to admit that it blends in rather well, certainly due to the surreal and attenuated atmosphere, with the activities just ticking over. There are indeed only a few visitors ambulating at a safe distance from each other and the presence of both animals and humans feels rather alienated.

At the entrance to the white tiger compound, I am greeted by a casually resting tiger sculpture. It is very well made but I can't help and think that in the zoo, like anywhere else in Singapore, representation and mediated interpretations of the actual experience are slowly taking over. I suddenly remember the heated discussion I had with a lady over the counter last year, when she insistently tried to sell me a ticket to a multimedia wildlife show and I explained in vain that I came to the zoo to experience nature and the animals with my own mental and somatic sensibilities. The distinction between the tangible and virtual reality sadly did not make any sense to her.

But here they are: two gorgeous white tigers, lazing around in the afternoon heat. They occasionally engage in a little flirt with each other before giving a yawn and returning into their dreamy lethargy. They look at us and we look at them and contemplating each other in this detached yet attentive manner is hypnotising. The gripping encounter with a different species sets my speculative mind in motion and I

imagine all kinds of scenarios about their past lives, their feelings towards each other and us, and the challenging assimilation to captivity. As I am transported by these dramatic thoughts, I forget to stay within the yellow boundaries of my safe distancing viewing box. Being now too close to another person is inappropriate and causes some discomfort. I quickly apologise. The floor demarcations actually add an intriguing behavioural and visual layer to the already conditioned zoo experience. Being strategically positioned in rectangular and square formats to accommodate small groups and single visitors, they inevitably draw attention to the omnipresent principle of confinement. With two or more creatures staring from cage to cage at one another, a curious confinement complot appears to be at work. When observers and observed are equally caged, it is hard to tell who holds whom at bay.

I walk over to the Pygmy Hippos whose tiptoeing-under-water moves I always enjoy. What catches my attention however, as I sit down, is a technician fixing something within the vitrine. Looking at his precise gestures and dedicated work is as fascinating as observing the animals which he joins, as another living creature, so naturally. In the zoo's established viewing framework, the observation of another human seems as normal as looking at the wildlife and even taking a picture does not feel inappropriate. While being fully aware of the strangeness of this moment and my own reaction, I appreciate how the man's presence interrupts the illusion for a short while and creates an awareness of the concrete labour and operational reality of the facility. As I continue my visit I witness more of such situations and while we are used to seeing zookeepers in enclosures during feeding hours or show presentations, it is bewildering to observe them being inside without the animals. The image of them being trapped becomes an allegory of our own captivity, and the interchangeability of rules and roles a symbol of our topsy-turvy world.

I pass by the kangaroos and they are not at home. I ponder their absence and the rather intrusive strategies of compensating such an eventuality with a wealth of documentation photographs, texts and objects. I spot a life-sized kangaroo sculpture positioned in front of a green screen, ready to participate in the production of a deceptive image, but no image will be taken. A zebra cloth covers the counter indicating that all activities are momentarily suspended. The entertainment props evoke the desolate feeling of an inaccessible past and uncertain future. If only we could add some labels to these objects and title them "performance relics" for the time being. Some ghosts of these activities are still mysteriously hovering around; the reverberation of visitors' voices, quarrels and laughter are floating in the air. When leaving the compound I finally see a kangaroo, printed on a banner and it looks rather happy, surrounded by abundant greenery.



I continue my flânerie, pass by the closed Icy Slush refreshment wagon, look in vain for the elephant compound entrance, and sit down in the Primate Kingdom for a little while. Birthday messages from Europe are coming in and it is good to feel close and connected. Strangely enough it is harder to be in tune with my direct environment. The safe distancing measures and zoo's ongoing renovation works disrupt the usually smooth flow between the exhibits and the missing stream of visitors only amplifies the gaps in between. Luckily, there are the regularly passing trams with zebra, giraffe and tiger patterns. Although empty, they provide a reassuring feeling of continuity, binding the fragmented experience together.



It is almost 4pm and I still have some miles to go. I cross the Reptile Garden, komodo dragon and giant turtle compound and have no affection for them at all. Then the black chimpanzees who bring back the memory of a zookeeper's vivid depiction of their sadistic nature, possibly leading to a pleasurable torturing and killing of humans. He shared other fascinating insider stories about animals' characters and moods back then and it is a pity that none of the multiple texts or screens mention such sharp yet empathetic observations. The north-east corner of the zoo usually feels quite gloomy to me and this year even more so, as it has the most direct connection with the virus. Bats and macaques are hosted side by side, the villain and the saviour in such close proximity!

I continue to walk south where some other of my favourite animals are waiting: the wild cats, giraffes and rhinos. The leopard is wayward and restless, pacing up and down in one continuous undulating move. I head to an alternative observation spot with better viewing conditions but the animal has no intention to follow me on this side of the enclosure. Hence, I contend with attentively examining the *mise-en-scène*: an arrangement of rocks and bushes inside and outside the vitrine simulates the extension of a life-sized black and white reproduction of a leopard in liberty. Presenting the animal's natural habitat so prominently next to an enclosure seems rather inappropriate, and the yawning void of the vitrine only augments the tension between these disparate realities. None of them is satisfying or capable of completing the other and put together like this, they form a curious diptych of artifice and absence. I wonder what visitors are supposed to feel and think when looking at such an arrangement? The ceiling ventilators are circulating hot air.

The piece next door has a different climate. In a cold room under an aircon unit, a huge poster of a resting lion is mounted on the wall. A printed caption informs the viewer that lionesses prefer lions with fuller and darker manes which symbolise their youthful strength. The widespread promotion of a good looking, vigorous youth, often represented by alpha-type males, also seems to be a trend in the zoo. I miss my own adolescent punk rock days, of which the leading values were provocation, subversion and change, and a cool appearance was an added bonus. The lioness herself is absent, in print and also in the enclosure.

My heightened awareness of the discrepancies between the distinctive physical and imagined spaces is intriguing and contrasts with my usual zoo experience. The microcosm of the zoo is typically characterised by an illusionary ecology of proximities—the proximity between animals from different geographies; between animals and humans; the urban and the wild. Bringing these essentially incompatible spheres together and presenting them as a coherent whole usually rests upon the smooth blurring of their specifics. Situated in the central green lung of the island, the zoo is far away from any visible markers of Singapore's densely urbanised cityscape and the fiction of driving into the jungle is up to now pretty much intact. With the planned expansion of the attraction and redevelopment of the area however—which comes at a high price as the native flora and fauna ironically had to be rescued and relocated to accommodate this other artificial wilderness—this feature will be gone soon. It will require additional tricks to simulate it in the future, just as in the zoo itself, where the impression of a cohesive space is achieved through the skilful blend of built architecture and organically grown vegetation, and a strong unifying visual identity of the various stations. The latter are comprehensively connected through a colourful location map and, of course, the continuously circulating animal tram. In addition, the large enclosures and respectful treatment of all species in equal manners generate a prevalent feeling of animals' close communion with nature and also each other. The comfort of Singapore's customer friendly service culture also naturally makes visitors feel at home and part of the experience.

The zoo's storytelling relies upon a sophisticated imagination to convey the setting and atmosphere of native wildlife. In the spirit of a modern drama, the different sceneries depict real-life environments in which the audience is invited to look through a transparent fourth wall into the lives of the animals. As credible and genuine characters, they perform in real-time and offer spectators a psychologically rich and realistic play which might include a provocative non-performance or mysterious absence. In the current situation however, the fourth wall is taken down and the dramatic plot interrupted. The safe-distancing instructions and delimitative lines act as audience-addresses in the sense of Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre,¹ disrupting the stage illusion and generating an estrangement effect. "Let's practise safe distancing. Please make room and be 1 metre apart from one another," says one of the signs in the lion enclosure, and the tape on the benches conveys the same message without words.

¹Epic theatre is a form of didactic drama associated with the dramatic theory and practice evolved by the German playwright-director Bertolt Brecht. Brecht's intention was to avoid illusion and appeal to his audience's intellect in presenting contemporary social realities on the stage. He used "alienating" or "distancing" effects to cause the audience to think objectively about the play, to reflect on its argument, to understand it, and to draw critical conclusions. The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Epic theatre," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 12 May 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/art/epic-theatre>



The viral enemy obviously also caused some damage here. With the dramatic apparatus now being made explicit, visitors are no longer exclusively involved in the emotive animal world. They are put at a physical and mental distance to critically reflect not only on what is presented in front of their eyes but also their own behaviour. The viewing rectangles can indeed be read as micro stages on which visitor's own behaviour is performed and observed.

In addition, the mirror effect of animal's and visitor's confinement, also personified through technicians' and zookeepers' solitary presence in the enclosures, constitutes another layer of distanciation which discloses the manipulative contrivances and fictive qualities of the presentation.

While Brecht's dramaturgy aimed to force viewers into a critical and analytical frame of mind that could potentially lead to transformative political and social action, viewers' alienation from a passive enjoyment of the zoo spectacle challenges another critical aspect: the notion of entertainment. Entertainment plays an important role in Singapore's service and tourism industries as well as domestic policy. In alignment with the state's progression as a smart nation, many of its attractions become increasingly digital and preferably immersive to distract their audiences in seducing audio-visual environments. While some of these initiatives make an original use of the current modes of communication, many flatten every experience through a standardised, non context-specific and lightweight entertainment approach.

I dwell for a moment in my memories of the early days of the internet and new technologies. They were so promising back then, offering an unprecedented space for experimentation, vibrant criticality, and electrifying democratic global exchange. It is disillusioning how, in the course of only two decades, the once utopian free space has been folded so seamlessly into the predominant capitalist system and subordinated to national aspirations.

In a place like Singapore where land is scarce, it certainly makes sense to focus actively on the development of such fictive and virtual spaces, as they can—to a certain extent—compensate for an actual lack of spatial diversity and physical movement. These additional spaces constitute a new form of land reclamation and support the illusion of a territorial expansion.

In this regard, the zoo has traditionally played a critical role as a key site of an imagined wilderness, a feature that has been systematically erased from the original landscape through massive urbanisation and the transformation of natural environments into manicured gardens. The excessive domination of nature obviously reflects a larger political ideology which increasingly also commands the digital arena. All space is political and the virtual is no exception.

In the communicative space of the zoo, technology is mainly employed as a tool for pedagogy or the spectacular staging of events. It is critical however, that the encounter between visitors and animals remains central and that this intrinsically unique experience is neither reduced to bare information nor replaced by a gimmicky theatricality. Every animal certainly has the capacity to run the show if the right contact with the audience is established. Moreover, visitors' own personal observations





and emancipated reading of the animal's persona and habitat must be empowered and the fascinating plurality of perception validated. There is no right or wrong in the sensible apprehension of the world and the zoo is certainly an ideal location to sharpen our own intuitive senses.

The encouragement of diversity seems furthermore critical on a larger societal scale, as well as the nurturing of alternative forms of intelligence, which can emerge from such phenomenological approaches. They are even more crucial in places like Singapore where the cerebral is often privileged over the sensible, and authentic, unbiased experiences are rare. I am increasingly sceptical in regard to this invasive obsession with entertainment which appears to become a generalised strategy to allay audiences' alertness and critical thinking. But then I am probably just a minimalist at heart who believes in the power of true relationships and auratic experiences that can arise from unmediated encounters between humans and animals and also objects. These unique ephemeral and poetic constellations are what I search for when I travel and what I focus on in my photography as well.

To clear my mind from this intense stream of thoughts, I spend my last 15 minutes in an empty enclosure nearby. As an ensemble, cages are silently looking at each other. The stage is set for an intriguing choreography to begin, bodies are invited to take their position and perform within their designated zones. Anyone can participate, but today anyone is no one. The scene is imbued with a transcendental atmosphere, some invisible spirits from the underworld or harbingers of the eschaton might be around.



I have the strange yet liberating feeling that I am finally having my real encounter with the animals, even if, or precisely because, their visual presence is yet concealed. My heart is full, this scene is most likely what I have been looking for today and in all these weeks. A situation that provides a clear and reassuring framework which is open enough to welcome a wide range of expressions and interpretations, with no dictatorial instructions to follow. Forming a collective with enough physical and psychological room for everyone to reimagine his or her role in this new configuration is a principle that I wish to see for the future and transition into the new world. I take out my camera and feel joy in framing the frames that are supposed to frame others who will

frame their own perceptions—through perhaps also as photographs, or just their minds. I click and hope that my picture will adequately reflect this open framework and invite future beholders to complete it with their own meaningful projections.

This energising creative moment actually reminds me of one of my latest photo series titled *Voyage by the window*. I began working on it shortly after my hospital discharge when I experienced a similar clash of disparate realities and got emotionally lost in-between. By way of resistance, I searched for a way to reconcile them, to bravely confront the loss of the protecting hospital cocoon, the continued and extreme isolation, the longing for being with my loved ones in different parts of the world, in places that are close to my heart. The concomitant desire was to travel in time, to stop, revisit and activate moments so that they would become meaningful in the present.



Sissi Kaplan, *Voyage by the Window #2 - Sri Lanka*, 2020

Dimensions variable, fine art print on paper.

Courtesy of the artist

Here you see me standing by my window with a herd of elephants in Sri Lanka. The visually evoked memory was probably more intense than the encounter I could have had with the zoo elephants today. The genuineness of the situation was so astonishing for me and also the viewers that we ended up believing that it was a real-time experience. My window became the frame for 10 of such scenes, which, in a performative act, liberated my mind and body from the imposed immobility and led to the elaboration of a veritable travel history. It was

a reminder that mobility exists essentially as an idea which can easily transgress all forms of voluntary or forced confinement.

And this is precisely the aspect that immersive digital experiences try to ride on, and often fail when the sleek overpowering presence of technology takes over. Memories and imagination are in flux, fragmented and require gaps to let different temporalities, spaces and experiences in. It is in this amalgam of eclectic realities, a certain chaos and imperfections, that participants develop a desire to become mentally and physically active, to contribute to the experience, alter and complete it, and finally take ownership. In this sense the virus-disrupted zoo visit was extraordinary as it ultimately gave a much deeper and more honest insight into this semi-fictional world, involuntarily recognising the limits of a constructed and one-sided storytelling by shifting the focus on untold stories that included the behind-the-scenes of the usually unseen labour and honest care for animals and audiences.

This letter became much longer than anticipated, my dear M, and I apologise for having taken so much of your time. Once the mind is liberated and in motion, it becomes cinematic and sometimes unstoppable, taking pleasure in audaciously transgressing established orders and conventions, and we shall let it be. It is time for me now to join my friends for a French dinner to celebrate this displaced birthday and our togetherness in the most international and festive manner.

With love,
S

PS. I would like to thank my friends Vinita Ramani for the stimulating exchange on the subject matter and Chris Yap for his help with the photo editing.

Photographs by Sissi Kaplan