

WAY 2 DRAGON (FULL DESCRIPTION)

WAY 2 DRAGON is a part nude performance and part documentary video that takes place in the capital of Malaysia. Kuala Lumpur is located where Gombak River merges with Klang River, as befits the literal meaning of the city: a muddy confluence. Unlike the city's imposing skyline, the Klang appears uninspiring at best, with its pungent odor induced by almost 170,000 tons of human waste, farm chemicals, and general rubbish that enter the river annually. Due to this misfortune, the river ranks in the top five most polluted rivers in the country.

Inspired by a worldwide trend of river restoration, the local and national governments have taken a concerted effort to improve the water quality and appearance of the Klang since 2012. With nearly 1.3 billion dollar investment, the River of Life project is considered one of the most expensive and extensive urban revitalization undertakings in global history. Given the promising effects of this commendable endeavor, Malaysian officials openly hope to witness the reputation of their capital city rise to match those of Southeast Asian financial hubs including Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Singapore.

When the artist visited Kuala Lumpur in early February of 2019, this megaproject had been more than 90% completed, with less than a year left. Nearly all sections of the Klang passing through the city's major districts had already metamorphosed into dazzling landmarks. However, a stretch near Chinatown had only recently begun to receive necessary attention.

One riverfront, after visited by multiple flash floods, succumbed to the fate of erosion more readily than others. The site was hardly attracting, if not altogether refusing, human visitations. An utter eyesore, the sunken pavement sheltered a wealth of trash. The Asian monitor lizards welcomed this pile of odious materials, which serves as an ideal bridge between the river and an exposed underground structure. Here, at the intersection of failed civil engineering and natural disaster, they sleep, sunbathe, swim, hunt, eat, and people-watch. They made a home.

These giant reptiles carved out a certain zone of sovereignty. Belonging to a nonplace-turned-habitat, they exemplify the performativity of placemaking. They offer an instance of the organism-environment relation that is as artificial as accidental. They defy the polarization between the wilderness and civilization, adapting to an urban environment that is adverse to human settlement. This irony calls into question a popular designation of wilderness as being external to modern civilization: Is the wilderness solely responsible for all those threats from which civilization protects its constituents and not which civilization itself invites? Possibilities of contamination, both physical and philosophical, are closer than they appear.

Varanus salvator make wetlands and swamps their natural habitat, as also portrayed in the video for comparison, but stepping outside their comfort zone by no means compromises their right to ferocity. True, these voracious beasts, however large, cannot challenge the privileged positions of dragons in the human imagination. Such powerful mythical figures bring human society to face its innate vulnerability, inspiring humility, while the resident lizards possess only a small share of the brute force that humans ascribe to dragons.

The opportunistic creatures, in this sense, are on their way to “dragon”—ever approaching but never reaching that asymptote of symbolism. At most, they recall to locals that this city is an ecosystem that does not cater to human species alone. And despite impending threats of eviction, the lizards have their way to drag on, maintaining their line of defense against the march of the anthropocene—the march toward the destruction of their unusual, unnatural habitat.