

Talk About Fur Flying

— Jacqueline Burckhardt

Interest in people having always been part of Elodie Pong's persona, it comes as no surprise that she chose to study sociology and anthropology. But in the process of trying to break out of the scientific regime and into more open terrain in which to conduct her research, she ended up in the arts. Art is the instrument, the system and the site that she uses to make public what society ordinarily treats as private. Pong foregrounds intimacy against a backdrop of norms and ideals to build up a collective image of the inner life that characterises the society to which she belongs – an image of autobiographical value that she is creating with and through others.

In two charming aperçus, *Butterfly Stroke, side A* (1994) and its sequel *Butterfly Stroke, side B* (2000), both video pieces, Pong established herself early on as a collector of the facets hidden within her fellow human beings. In the first video, a woman moves her shoulder blades to flap the wings of a butterfly that has been tattooed onto her back. In the second, the tattoo of a lissom butterfly unfolds on a woman's sex

when she spreads her legs, also richly tattooed in flowery ornament.

Another such buoyant work is *Pretty Pretty* (1998), a slide show of two sisters, aged eight and nine, who have plundered Mummy's makeup kit and jewellery box to play the femme fatale. Their aplomb demonstrates how shrewdly they see through the adult world and how skilfully they can imitate the seductive gesture.

Wondering how these sophisticated little girls have developed, Pong later returned to film them again, a project that resulted in a work titled *Five Years Later*. Now entirely without masquerade, the teenage girls appear slightly bored and rather aloof, caught in a world of their own, and dreaming of a future with house and child. These examples show that Pong's work does not follow a linear progression. She picks up old trails, embellishes them and often fuses them with new elements.

The more we know about others, the more we learn about ourselves. This insight may have motivated Pong to build a databank of secrets over a period of three years, from 2001 to 2003, which reads as a revelation of the flip side of the complex fabric of our social body. She cajoled over 300 secrets from visitors in an interactive installation. The title *ADN/ARN*, an acronym for Any Deal Now/Any Reality Now, suggests that one can haggle over the price of a secret, and that every form of reality, including lies and cheating, will be recorded. As she puts it herself in the video *Subtitles* (2003), "I like to remember things my own way." In fact, the title "ADN" implies the quest for a DNA profile of society (ADN = DNA in French).

The system of the installation was intimidating: a series of rooms as inviting as the bomb shelter in which it was presented, an array of reality-show surveillance cameras and a canned voice telling each visitor how to proceed. They could remain anonymous, put on a mask and have their voice distorted electronically. Visitors signed a contract, surrendering all the video rights to the artist, which allowed Pong to use the

footage in her film *Secrets For Sale* (2003) and to issue in 2005 a set of four DVDs with all of the secrets.

The artist did not anticipate how profoundly her serious game would affect the mental state of the participants and how deep would be the voyeuristic depths thus revealed. There were harmless secrets and minor obsessions and others that were playfully invented. But there were also visitors whose bodies and souls harboured hidden horrors and perversions, whose yearning for deliverance from apathy, mortal anxiety, loneliness or sexual trauma was extremely hard to take.

In *ADN/ARN*, as in a number of other works, Pong provided her co-players with a rigorous framework, which would allow them to create any desired image of themselves. In the video *A certain general* (2004), she even laid out a red carpet for them. Through her experience with lay people and friends, she found herself drawn to filmmaking. She has begun working with actors and dancers, that is, with professionals who know exactly what it means to be someone else, and she is currently directing a film with the working title *Supernova*, which consists of several episodes.

One of these episodes, *Je suis une bombe* (I Am a Bomb, 2006), has already won several prizes.

A figure wearing a panda bear costume is seen doing an erotic pole dance in a dilapidated hall. In touching and lonely oblivion, the bear gyrates, as if around its own axis, accompanied by gliding music in which a male voice keeps singing the empty words, "Tonight... tonight... I give you... yeah, yeah, oh... oh, oh..." On removing the panda's head, the figure turns out to be a young woman who steps up close to the camera to sing her own praises with wild, seductive appeal and eloquent urgency: "I am a bomb... I am perfect... My origins go back to the beginning of Time and will probably end with Time. I am primitive, I am a delicate being, sublime and troubling... unprecedented and absolute."

The genetic evolution of Pong's panda bear is

quite different from that of the disarming simplicity and nonchalance of its chatty male counterpart in the Fischli/Weiss film *The Least Resistance*. Pong's young woman proves to be as strong as she is vulnerable, a potential powderkeg. Talk about fur flying—when this cuddly bear sheds its skin along with its predefined role, we are faced not only with a *bombe* but also with an artistic inquiry into a highly complex image of woman.

Three more episodes from *Supernova* were on view at Kunstmuseum Solothurn in spring 2007: *Untitled (Plan For Victory)* (2006), *The Last Supper* (2007) and *No No No* (2007). The titles themselves already speak of failure, of an end and of denial. *Plan For Victory*, Pong's most explicitly political piece so far, refers to the strategy for victory in Iraq. A declaration was painted in luminous white on a matt white wall: *We are Knights on the Trajectories of a Post-Everything Era*. Knights are noble and fight for a cause. The kind of trajectories and where they will lead in the new era is the subject of Elodie Pong's ongoing research.