

## Images of an Over-Exposed Era

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—Chantal Tourigny Paris

Translated by Jonathan Kolski and Miriam Katz

Since 1996, Swiss artist Elodie Pong has explored and interlinked the fields of experimental video, performance, installation, and writing. The subjects presented in her videos testify to the wide lens through which she views society. Her works touch upon issues such as identity, relationships, and urbanism; *AND/ARN (Any Deal Now, Any Reality Now)*, a large-scale project which the artist developed between 2001 and 2003, deals with these themes in an unusual way. This interactive, performative installation's *modus operandi* consists of a video recording featuring visitors' private confessions, a commercial negotiation, and a contractual agreement. Pong initially developed the project for four months at the Centre d'Arts sceniques Contemporain Arsenic (Lausanne, Switzerland), then for two months at the Centre Culturel Suisse (Paris, France). More than 600 people participated in the enterprise, resulting in *Secrets for Sale*, a 64-minute video, as well as *Secrets*, a corpus of confessions gathered on DVD. In addition, in 2005 these capsules of secret revelations were projected on a wide screen in a public square in the Tokyo for an event entitled *Peripheral Area*.

The *Supernova* exhibition, an installation consisting of four videos from 2006, continues to examine the overlap between private and social spheres, as well as real and fictional worlds. In doing so, Pong crystallizes the mindset of a generation characterized by knowingly narcissistic individuals guided by an imperative to succeed, commonly referred to as "Generation Me". From both an inside and outside perspective, Pong emphasizes the complexity of these people's relationships to themselves and to others. The artist has a sharp consciousness of the needs of this community, which has close ties to the screen and to the image. Using performative video (there is no better media through which to deal with a generation known to have great issues with representation) the artist presents scenarios, either invented or inspired by real situations, playing with various levels of narration and context, simultaneously revealing and defusing the operating mode on which the said group functions. These tragicomic sequences depict absurdity, humor, and drama at the same time, opening the door to universes that fascinate, destabilize and disturb. For a group of people who projects their images onto others, thus sublimating themselves, the role of the audience takes on a particular significance. Pong's videos give perspective on this dynamic; they exercise a strong influence on the viewers, question the voyeur inside of them, and make them feel as if they are a target for stars in need of an audience. The artist's imagery is captivating because it relies on aesthetic and symbolic codes of a society's shared imagination in which the body contains a message. Though the characters at first seem to simply struggle for power and seduction, they soon reveal more uncertain identities, unveiling an intricate interdependence between the audience-voyeur and the performer-exhibitionist.

This process also manifests itself in the video *Je suis une bombe*. Through an appealing and catchy opening segment, the audience is taken "hostage" by the performer. This wide-screen projection shows a character disguised in a panda costume executing an exotic dance in a bare industrial environment with only a small disco ball on the floor and the "choreographic" device, the pole around which the action unrolls. House music

accompanies the spectacle. At the end of this absurd and farcical performance a woman comes out of the costume, revealing her identity, and stoically delivers a kind of self-glorifying monologue: “I am a bomb, I am perfect, and each part of my body is perfect... That’s the way it is, there’s nothing I can do about it, neither I, neither you...” An unforgiving admission of (im)perfection that at first sounds like an appalling expression of the Ego, but then turns out to express some kind of insecurity, a visceral need to magnify oneself. Furthermore, the parallel made between two seemingly contradictory worlds—one related to the childlike world of the panda, the other referencing the explicitly erotic pole dancing— is a way to deal, through humor, with the matters of hyper-sexuality as well as dogmas of seduction and fantasy which are all part of an ongoing phenomenon in our modern society, in both adult and younger populations.

*Secrets*, as described in the introduction, also explores themes related to ego, body and image, but this time from another point of view. Fragments of *Secrets*, a central component *Supernova* exhibition at the Occurrence gallery, Montreal, could be seen in the “cabinet” (a small glassed-in room in the hallway), while the full corpus was on view in the main room. The specific context in which the confessions were collected also has to be described. In this interactive performance, the artist invited visitors to share a secret under the much desired “anonymous” status, and by means of a negotiation, the artist and the visitor decided the commercial value of the confession, depending on the artist’s interest in it: How much would it be worth to have this secret included in the collection she already has? Divided into three modules (cashing zone, confession zone, negotiation zone), the installation was made of eight security cameras, recording each step of the performance with the agreement of the visitor. At the end of the performance, a contract was drawn up, specifying that the visitors gave up the rights to their images for the purpose of subsequent use. The performer could customize the space by choosing a background from a choice of urban or country surroundings, in the vein of kitschy 1970s wallpaper. A robotic voice gave instructions. Visitors could also choose to modify their own voices, to disguise their identity with a costume, which reminded one of fetishism. Such *mise-en-scene* seemed to take the drama out of the action of confessing and made the situation appear more casual. *Secrets* questions the very core of the voyeur’s pleasure as he witnesses the private scenes as well as the exhibitionist’s contentment to be put on stage. Moreover, the overall project clearly references the world of reality television which brings private lives to a public screen to the utter joy of the audience.

In *The Weepers*, Pong cleverly questions the absurdity of the social system present within the group upon which she focuses. The video features competing actors who are asked to cry. Shot using a green screen, the recording reveals the technical device of a film set. The cinematographic reference is obvious as is the metaphor for it addresses a world subsisting on screens and fueled by performances. Faced with these actors who, in an emotional crescendo, wind up crying their hearts out, we are once again confronted with the ambiguity between reality and fiction. Although this all takes place in a made-up context, one cannot be indifferent to these emotional excesses. The piece also makes one think about the instability and un-sustainability of such a “star system”. By introducing a sense of failure, Pong further explores this concept in *Untitled (Plan for Victory)*. In this video, the artist predicts the collapse of an empire built on unstable grounds. The words “Plan for Victory” are shown in a steady shot, written with fluorescent-pink letters on the snowy steep of a rocky mountain, making spray-painted

graffiti the emblem of a heroic act. A rumble can be heard, as if from far away, progressively amplifying, while on the screen an avalanche buries the victorious statement, destroying everything in its way. There is no way the allegory could be made clearer, to the individuals who mostly value glory, immediacy, and image.

In *Supernova*, Pong reveals a dark side of her generation, however as Bettina Steinbruegge suggests in her text for the exhibition, a possible escape from fatality is outlined: “Supernova is the death knell for a star, announcing the depletion of its nuclear energy. If the star’s mass is important enough, its core subsoil and drop an astronomical quantity of energy that leads to the creation of a star with neutron, whose dazzling twirl and intense radiation are seen for hundreds of years...” This potential was predicted in the last piece of the video corpus entitled *Sincerely Yours from Alexandria*. This work was created in 2005 in Alexandria, Egypt, on the occasion of the project *Family, You, Me and the Trajectories of a Post-Everything Era*. This exhibition at the Alexandria Contemporary Art Forum featured 6 artists from Switzerland and Egypt invited to explore the concept of relationships. Pong spent a day with three random people, allowing them to ask her any questions they had in mind. Then, the three participants were asked to describe Pong as they saw her in places that were meaningful to them. Re-contextualizing the performance, the video *Sincerely Yours from Alexandria* presents a room in which wedding festivities take place, with a floodlit main stage where a couple would sit.

The artist shot inside of this empty space and composed a soundtrack using fragments of the recorded interviews. In the context of *Supernova*, the piece seems to be placed at a distance from the other three performative videos. From a formal point of view, the video is freed from all seductive attempts and clear references; to get a sense of it, therefore, it is the audience’s task to inquire about the issue that is dealt with, to show interest in it, and to create a relationship with it. This piece carries new perspectives and is imbued with optimism. Although one can see the scenario as an act of self-glorification or of disguised voyeurism (because the artist is central to the performance, therefore possibly assuming the exhibitionist’s role, and the one she talks to assumes the voyeur’s role), *Sincerely Yours from Alexandria* strives for a certain effort of connectivity and the possibility of a relationship based on equality and understanding.

Illustrating the essence of her time from her own point of view, Pong’s work certainly gives us a lot to reflect upon, in particular in relation to this trend of taking pleasure from exposing one’s self and watching others do the same, a trend that paradoxically transforms intimacy into the ultimate new form of socialization. In such an era of media-oriented transparency of identity, private revelations in public space became continuously and collectively desired. The screen’s omnipresence is tied to this phenomenon, especially because it contributed to the rise of a virtual universe, determined by the concept of an idealized world, where the body and the image dominate, where engagement yields to fantasy, and where the selfish pleasure reigns. The contemporary individual both creates and is created by this society led by imperatives of success, consummation, immediacy and perfection. One becomes a victim of such utopias, confusedly reacting to these unnatural values. In a globalized world that imposes an exclusive, homogeneous system, it is not surprising to see identities fading away and the ego radicalizing, aiming to self-actualize and to express its uniqueness.

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