

I know that I don't know: On Elodie Pong's Essayistic Exhibition @jevouspropose

In a moment of increasing uncertainty, yet urgency – of accelerated globalization, the current pandemic and its economic consequences, faced with our insecurities regarding what we thought we knew – how do we overcome our feelings of helplessness and insufficient action? Addressing the “known knowns, known unknowns and unknown unknowns”¹ brought upon us not just by right-wing propaganda, but by our own understanding of shifting perspectives in times of decolonization, the geological turn, culture wars (as in defending and fighting for equal global rights), and maintaining hope for a planet on the brink of irreversible changes, is not just necessary but vital.

Elodie Pong proposes a radical approach towards these uncertainties. The cobblestones, traditionally associated with protest, revolution and violent uprisings, are transformed into small planetary gardens. Her living sculptures *Does the World Look Greener through Green Eyes?* (2020) demand care and love, the application of water in its most delicate and ephemeral form: mist. This paradox (of potential violence and care) is accentuated by the aptly titled *Just Do It?* (2017), a kinetic sculpture literally creating attention and meaning out of thin air, emphasizing the question marks of the titles, and introducing the theme of temporality into an exhibition named *Our Unknown Known* within a space called *jevouspropose*.

The concomitant influence of digital culture and its accessible worlds of knowledge have not just created doubt within the last 30 years; disparate cultures, understandings and art realities have become interconnected and contemporaneous with each other. There are many co-existing ways of being in time, and belonging to it today. Thus, while being increasingly aware of being in the present, we are becoming attentive to other kinds of time, and as a consequence, we seem to be living in an expanded present. But how far back and forth in time does this durational extension reach? Does it create a poetical or political space?²

Elodie Pong (by invitation of Gesa Schneider by invitation of Sabina Kohler) proposes the following line of thought: how do we appease our doubts and propitiate them with our critical understanding of non-knowledge, that is, with our reactions to power inequalities within systems of knowledge, that she identifies and questions within the spaces between *Autonomous (Office Plant)*, *Titles* (both 2020), and *This is (What You Think) Happened* (2019). Although Pong offers no easy answers to the raised conundrums (one might argue with her that it is not up to artists to do so), her sculptural understanding of the spaces between the works as a field of ideas and discourses, forces us to define a position. Non-knowledge doesn't equal non-action, it could actually lead to new modes of informed and measured activism, a form of contemporary hermeneutics (to be understood as an active process of “reading between the lines”).

Confronted with this, various artists –like Elodie Pong– are asking a relevant question: how can we think and interpret the contemporary conditions? How can we alert others to fragile conditions and re-imagine thinking together? The art of conceiving the world poetically is a skill. It re-defines “not-knowing” as a practice. It evades logic and yet also accompanies it.

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Much has happened since February 12, 2002, when Donald Rumsfeld in his speech at the US Department of Defense news briefing addressed the lack of evidence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq: *Reports that say that something hasn't happened are always interesting to me, because as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns –the ones we don't know we don't know. And if one looks throughout the history of our country and other free countries, it is the latter category that tend to be the difficult ones.*

² A discussion of this poetical space and its interconnected feminist theories can be found in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*.

It is not simply beautiful, but also arises beautifully and honors natural forces as well as the Western canon and global ideas. Art appears as (political) imagination, as a possible way of creating a shared cosmos. Artistic knowledge in this understanding is a space of gathering and reunion, a traditional form of learning and engagement. This presents both a moment of common experience and a form of performing and enacting of communality. Artistic practice as a “Non-Space” for “Non-Knowledge” engages us at co-building an ethical relation to the worlds we live in.³

With the rising concern for ecology and climate change, we can no longer imagine nature being outside –outside of us, of the polis, of thinking– signifying the non-human, the other, the external. Within this context Pong’s artistic essay⁴ for *jevouspropose* imagines possible futures of discourse: how can artistic propositions become projects of genuine learning and ongoing inquiry, how can we re-connect to the made advancements re-conceptualized through political struggles, post-colonial theory, claims for restitution, feminism and participation? How can the metacultural value of these questions in the Anthropocene be re-envisioned as to create new practices and legitimations, methods of sharing, dissemination and interpretation? How can visual art include other fields of research such as filmmaking, politics, botany, anthropology and so forth?

Invoking new perspectives on what life and politics could look like, perhaps it is necessary to question the future-to-come rooted in the mud, living in the trees, frozen in the melting glaciers and in the DNA of extinct species, but also in the poetry and visions of common ancestors, the vegetal and the mineral. One aspect of this might be clarified within new approaches towards the objects displayed in exhibitions as well. Non-Western views of nature and life are based on the idea of “multi-naturalism,” a finely defined realm of both self-similarity and difference within the world of plants, animals, and humans, expressing different embodiments and affects. Nature is not a tamed and transparent backdrop to human activity and exploitation but is rife with strong forms of agency that exert a significant influence on universal processes at large.⁵ *The Life of Plants*, a recent publication by Emanuele Coccia,⁶ develops an original “phytophilosophy” very much along such thinking, arguing that plants are the medium through which we perceive and experience the world. Elodie Pong proposes them as our natural allies within our struggle to confront the unknown knowns defining our times of change.

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³ In “Writing Culture” Stephen A. Taylor argues: “A post-modern ethnography is a cooperatively evolved text consisting of fragments of discourse intended to evoke in the minds of both reader and writer an emergent fantasy of a possible world of commonsense reality, and thus to provoke an aesthetic integration that will have a therapeutic effect. It is, in a word, poetry – not in its textual form, but in its return to the original context and function of poetry, which by means of its performative break with everyday speech, evoked memories of the ethos of the community...” Taylor, “Post Modern Ethnography,” 125.

⁴ I read this exhibition as an essay, as it is trying to make a coherent, yet poetic, argument, gaining its stringency not from linearity or scholarly eruditeness, but from a free-flowing stream of consciousness and associations.

⁵ The publication which voiced this idea, Eduardo Viveiros de Castros’ *Radical Dualism: A Meta-Phantasy on the Square Root of Dual Organizations or a Savage Hommage to Lévi-Strauss* was published in conjunction and by Documenta 13.

⁶ Emanuele Coccia. *The Life of Plants. A Metaphysics of Mixture*, Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2018.