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(Artist) Ellen Pau

Opaque, Impenetrably Concealed Secrecy

—A Reading Guide to Ellen Pau and 'Inauspicious Symbol'

Article by Anthony Yung

You look at festival lights along the street

Not used to every lightbulb

Flickering specifically for you

You are not used to

Those fawning

Colourful bells

Convincing you of simple pleasures

Yet you also hum a tune of universal celebration^[1]

In the early 1990s, video art was a very minor genre in Hong Kong, leaving only scarcely archived and documented materials. Reviews and criticisms are particularly rare; one of the most insightful reviews is an article on a Videotage screening in 1990 by Cheung Chi Kwong,^[2] reflecting on his experience there. The author wrote that although "it was a very small screening room, there was a large crowd of audience and was therefore delightful," and that he was however disappointed by most films that night. Remarkable were also some comments on the individual works, describing them as "esoteric and esoteric," "full of extremely private signs and codes," "burning down bridges of communication."^[3]

These were remarkable, because future critics would gradually realise that, this quality of being "esoteric and esoteric" is not a matter of the quality of the art, and is not specific to video art per se, but is a fundamental psychological symptom of art in and of Hong Kong. In 1996, Benny Chia and Eric Otto Wear co-curated an exhibition called "Restricted Exposure—Private Content, Public View", which effectively deepened the discussion of such observation.^[4] In the exhibition catalogue, Chang Tsong-zung contributed *The Secret Artist: Is Hong Kong art the true underground?*, a multi-layered analysis from social and cultural perspectives, an article that has become a Hong Kong art history must-read.

In response to the overall 'transparent' character of Hong Kong life, the pursuit of art (specifically art seen to be 'avant-garde' or 'contemporary') becomes above all a strategy for protecting one's spiritual integrity. Here art is practiced as self-defense, rather than as a means to reach out, to proselytise or to attack... Opaqueness is the primary colour; therefore, some of the most interesting art is created out of paranoid secrecy... What comes across from all this is a mind passionate for private worlds. Artistic privacy is so jealously guarded as to be detrimental for communication. To the public face of the city, to its pragmatism and rationality, art has developed a quiet resistance. It leans strongly toward a form of diarist soliloquizing, coding the artistic language with personal references which may even be intentionally obscure to the artist himself.^[5]

To this day, it is still largely effective to interpret the art of Hong Kong through this notion of secrecy. Although the acceptance and acknowledgement of the art industry—only the art industry, not art itself—has been improved over the years, for a number of different reasons the physical and spiritual space of existence in Hong Kong have further shrunken, resulting in helpless suffocation that is deemed to continue impact cultural production, fundamentally and irrevocably. Now that we have finally come to terms with the fact that secrecy is not a technical blindspot of art of Hong Kong, but is its character (or in fact a character flaw); is it then possible to tailor a critical

framework to identify and interpret the exceptional value of this character and its products?

From a first glance, Ellen Pau's artworks—especially videos made in the 1980s and 1990s—are unfailingly obscure. The well-known piece *Diversión* (1990) is exemplary in this regard; it is known that Pau made this piece after attending with a number of Hong Kong artists a video art workshop hosted by the Goethe Institute and the German artist Hartmut Jahn.^[vi] Artists retrieved for the first time historical footage from Hong Kong government's archives, and were to make use of it creating artworks. Pau's *Diversión* appropriates scenes of a Victoria Harbour swimming contest in the 1960s, montaging the footage with additional clips, including scenes of a ferry harbour and people taking ferry rides at night, and scenes of some young women demonstrating how to swim at a pool. Some other clips are utterly unaccountable, such as shots of empty spaces between buildings and stairwells; images of rising, glowing lanterns or will-o'-wisp; and sights of a person who seems possessed, repeatedly tripping herself over or charging towards a mountain slope.

It is not difficult to understand that Pau used the swimming contest footage as a metaphor for the emigration from Hong Kong that began in the late 1980s. However, the inclusion of other clips seemingly pertains to the artist's personal ideas or emotional reactions regarding life and reality, souring the artwork, as if the point was to conceal its true theme. The Cantonese title of the video works literally means *being caught in the middle of the river*, perfectly precise and acute in captioning Hong Kong people's suspended situation at the time; the English title, *Diversión*, however, in a very selective way conceals this urgent, imminently subjective perspective. It is therefore just to describe this work as *restricted exposure*: frustrating is the fact that the truth of the artwork is only available to a handful of viewers.

But *Diversión's* privacy is seemingly not driven by the need for protecting one's spiritual integrity, and is instead devised as part of a rather complex strategy. The video takes as its point of departure a very public piece of material, leaving open and visible the theme that is its immediate reality, all in order to integrate personal, spiritual reactions and reflections with experimental artistic forms. The performance company Zuni Icosahedron has also adopted this strategy—one can trace it back to as far as Brecht's alienation effect, emphasising the gesture of consciously employing secrecy and opaqueness as an artistic language, in order to dissolve reality and politics' hard shells, or to positively calibrate the synchronisation between artistic forms and internal activities.

Let's take a different look, this time into Pau's personal experience. She is 100% a Hong Kong artist who grew up in the 1960s through 1970s when Hong Kong was itself in adolescence. The Hong Kong that was "clear and lucid," "with nothing to hide," "has neither the time nor the spiritual hunger [for art]; life is too full as it is"—was in growth.^[vii]

A quiet girl, born into a family of doctors, grew up in a hospital dorm where there were few neighbours, taught in a Catholic girls' school... It is hard to imagine how intricately layered and walled her heart might be. It thus seems reasonable that she would like to plunge herself into a type of art that involves concealment and secrecy. But another unique element also factors in differentiating her from many other Hong Kong artists, that is the fact that Pau majored in Diagnostic Radiography in university, and used to work as a professional radiographer and mammographer. This is Pau's *fun fact* that everybody talks about; for our purposes here, we can say that this professional/vocational/technical identity has become for her artistic career a brilliant protection, indirectly building a relatively positive spiritual environment.

Additionally, since Pau's professional background has nothing to do with arts and culture, her artistic sensibility is patently different from other Hong Kong video artists of her generation: she has never received any formal artistic trainings (not even drawing lessons when she was little!), and was not

enlightened by European art films (such as the French New Wave that was immensely influential in Hong Kong). The starting point of Pau's artistic sensibility could be twofold: music (pop and alternative; under the pseudonym of Gat Kwong (吉光) she has written a lot of music reviews), and video technologies (exactly where her professional identity and artistic identity overlap).

It then becomes easier to appreciate David Clarke's comparison: "Nam June Paik subverts the information content of his imagery by a strategy of overload, but Ellen Pau achieves the same end by moving in the opposite direction. Her minimal and often slow-moving videos foreground rhythmic and formal concerns, and explore poetic dimensions"^[viii] Pau's only work shot on film (8mm), and also one of the earliest works ever published, was *Glove* (1984; thanks to Videotage for digitising the film, it becomes available for exhibitions in recent years). Although it could count as Pau's only video that involves a narrative element, an examination of *Glove* ought to be more concerned with the origin of the artist's interest in rhythm and form.

Pau's ensuing series of video installations operate in the same way, continuing to explore rhythm and form. For example, the tasteless, cheap piece of faux fur that wiggles, trying vainly to act elegant and sexy in *Vogue* (first version created in 1991) and the heavily scarred palm that comprises countless scratches in *The Great Movement: Red Stock* (first version created in 1997) all function as brilliant projected surfaces that correspond to the spatio-temporal contexts of the artworks with specific materiality (all of Pau's installations are site-specific in nature, and the originals are gone now; exhibition opportunities in recent years necessitate remakes and restagings).

Although there are extremely private elements in her art, there is also an continued, embedded exploration of video and media technologies, which in turn grants the individual artworks instrumental rationality and structure. Examining her oeuvre as a whole, one can understand that, besides the specific theme of each piece, the videos also experiment with a variety of video technologies and genres. A couple of examples include *Drained II* (1989), which is focused on playing with different effects a certain model of video mixer can produce; *Disenchantment of the Statue* (1987), which starts by excavating the curiosity of generating a large number of noises when filming in a pitch-black environment; *TV Game of the Year* (1989), which parodies a TV game show; and *Operation Theatre* (1995), which borrows the form of the surveillance camera that the artist has been particularly interested in^[ix].

In the 2000s, Pau was focusing on curating and organising new media art exhibitions and festivals, and was not as involved in making artworks as a practising artist. Only since 2016 she has once again become prolific, demonstrating a significant strategic turn: more willing (and better conditioned) to realise projects that are larger in terms of scale and cost. Are these large-scale pieces, then, finally free from secrecy and concealment and are now *public art*?

In 2022, Pau was co-commissioned by M+ and Art Basel to create a new work for M+ Facade. It was deemed an important art project as it was part of the city's campaign to announce the end of the pandemic and the reopening of Hong Kong. This new work is called *The Shape of Light*, and is, according to the press release, a sign language version of *The Heart Sutra*, "offering the city a space of healing." Yet, is it not exactly and entirely full of signs? *The Heart Sutra* is one of the most translated Buddhist classics, producing new translations every year. One can imagine how broad and equivocal its content is. Pau's version of it even relies upon sign language, performance, and light and shadows—some must be suspecting that under the harmonious public art surface of this particular reading of *The Heart Sutra*, there is something Trojan.

According to the museum's statement, M+ Facade faces Victoria Harbour, and is 65 metres tall by 110 metres wide, "visible up to 1.5 kilometres away when viewed on Hong Kong Island. This enormous light-powered canvas,

embedded with thousands of LEDs, enlivens the Hong Kong skyline as a key point of connection with our audiences."^[x] In other words, the M+ Facade is the latest and most elaborate LED screen on the coast of the West Kowloon District. One has to be reminded of the very classic Hong Kong pastime in the 1980s and 1990s of going to see the Christmas lights in Tsim Sha Tsui. Most Hong Kong people did it at the time, and the beautiful decorations even served as an index of the economy each year. The better the business, the more elaborate the lights. There was a time when it got only brighter year after year, as if it was a show that would never end.

Christmas lights in Tsim Sha Tsui or fireworks over Victoria Harbour are both metaphors for Hong Kong's obsession with entertainment: extravaganza testifies to Hong Kong's prosperity. Although Hong Kong people may not mind "humming a tune of universal celebration," but everybody knows that pretty, fanciful things such as lights and fireworks cannot penetrate concealed hearts, and may even worsen people's pain.

This is how I understand why Pau's new work, *Speculative Generations of Flora 0* (2023), appears to be an elaborate, luxurious chandelier.^[xi] *Speculative Generations of Flora 0* is the latest chapter of the ongoing series "Speculative Flora" that explores the history and present life of Hong Kong Orchid Tree (*Bauhinia x blakeana*), the floral emblem of Hong Kong, through historical research, genetic analyses, and technological imaginations. In fact, many have already discovered that the strange origin of the flower is not unlike the tumultuous fate of Hong Kong. In 1965, when the flower was officially named the floral emblem of Hong Kong, papers introduced the flower thus:

"The Hong Kong Orchid Tree with its branches spreading out and low is one of the most beautiful ornamental trees in Hong Kong. Its leaves are double-lobed, blooms last for a few days, but never produces seeds or fruits."^[xii]

Many have pointed out at the time that it is an inauspicious symbol to name a sterile plant as a floral emblem. Interestingly, around the time of the Handover of Hong Kong in 1997, the government did not pick another flower but further elevated the Hong Kong Orchid Tree, widely using it on the city's flag, coat of arms and coins. They only secretly and occasionally removed the character 洋 (*foreign*) in its Chinese name 洋紫荊 in official documents, calling it 紫荊花, in order to make Hong Kong less foreign. Little did they know that 洋紫荊 and 紫荊花 (*Cercis chinensis*, the Chinese redbud) are two different species; the sculpture that honours the Handover is even known as a 金紫荊 (Gold Chinese redbud), which is amusing in its own way.

Around the time of the Handover, Hong Kong became a global focus. The cultural scene felt the urge to establish a foundation for Hong Kong's cultural identity, and some wisemen were desperate enough to propose that, if a foundation could not be located anywhere, then it does not hurt creating one out of thin air. That is to say, to create Hong Kong's myths using metaphors and parables. That is why there were the influential fish (from Oscar Ho Hing Kay's "Loting" series of artworks and exhibitions) and bird (from Chan Bing Chiu's play *Archaeology Bird*, which is also related to the image of the bird without legs in *Days of Being Wild*)—but there were no flowers. Only in recent years have many people come to realise that the Hong Kong Orchid Tree is the most fitting metaphor. Ellen Pau's "Speculative Flora" series not only speculates on the flower's past but also its future. In other words, there are not only legends and myths, but also prophecies.

But it is hard to predict things. Ironclad promises can be broken; the species that is deemed at birth to be the *last of its kind* perseveres even to this day, so one may say that what certainly seems like a bleak and hopeless future may eventually turn around. I look forward to reading Pau's prophecies, accurate or not, and shall take the fawning lights as flickering specifically for us.

[i] Yam Gong, *You Look at Festival Lights along the Street*, 1997

[ii] A review on "Videotage 90" by Chang Chi Kong, *HK Film Bi-weekly* Ed. 284, 15 Feb, 1990. In 1986, with May Fung, Wong Chi-fai and Comyn Mo, Ellen Pau co-founded Videotage (the moniker combines *video* and *montage*) at the office of the experimental performance company Zuni Icosahedron. From then on and to this day, Videotage is the most influential institution in the region in terms of promoting video and media art.

[iii] Chang Chi Kong, *A review on "Videotage 90"*, 1990.

[iv] "Restricted Exposure - Private Content: Public View", Exhibition Hall, Low Block, Hong Kong City Hall, Hong Kong, 30 Jan – 5 Feb 1996. See: <https://aaa.org.hk/archive/47366>

[v] Chang Tsong-zung, *The Secret Artist: Is Hong Kong art the true underground?*, in Benny Chia (ed.), *private content: public View—opinions on Hong Kong art and documents from the exhibition Restricted Exposure*, 1997, A project of the Hong Kong Fringe Festival, pp. 82–89

[vi] The workshop was "Two Visions: Between Reality and Imagination", which took place at Hong Kong Arts Centre and Goethe Institut, Hong Kong, in December, 1989.

[vii] Chang Tsong-zung, *The Secret Artist: Is Hong Kong art the true underground?*, in Benny Chia (ed.), *private content: public View—opinions on Hong Kong art and documents from the exhibition Restricted Exposure*, 1997, A project of the Hong Kong Fringe Festival, pp. 82–89

[viii] David Clarke on Ellen Pau, in *The Second Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art: Brisbane Australia 1996*, 1996, Queensland Art Gallery, p. 70

[ix] Ellen Pau's interest in the surveillance camera (closed-circuit television) possibly has to do with her experience as a photographer at Zuni Icosahedron in the early years: "The vice of the closed-circuit television is not the fact that it records, but is that the author is ambiguous. Nobody knows who exactly is watching you through the camera, and what exactly does he wants. 'Get yourself together, the show's on.' The activities of the eyes become the consciousness of the video recording, or vice versa. The exact quality of your performance is irrelevant as it is important to record you caught off guard—a record that is believed to be most authentic. In other words, if a performance is a process that goes with a set of conventions that involves recording one another and involves optical memories, then it in its totality is no longer a documentation of the performance, but is a performance of documentation..." (Ellen Pau's *Ten Notes on Video*, 1990)

[x] M+'s official website: <https://www.mplus.org.hk/tc/mplus-facade/>

[xi] The discussion here is based upon the exhibition proposal of 'Inauspicious Symbol' since the artworks are to be completed at the time of writing. It is likely that there are differences but it is believed that the analysis shall stand.

[xii] 20 Jan 1965, *The Kung Sheung Daily News*. "The Government names the Hong Kong Orchid Tree the floral emblem of the city."