

Helmhaus Zürich

11 March – 8 May 2016

ELODIE PONG – PARADISE PARADOXE
Odour. A Rumour

You can close your eyes but you can't turn off your nose. Elodie Pong, video and installation artist from Zurich, takes the invisible olfactory architecture that surrounds us as the point of departure for her solo exhibition at Helmhaus Zürich. In an exhibition of almost exclusively new works, Pong has created plants that grow only in a 3-D printer, a robot that hurls the names of perfume at the wall, and a fragrance never smelled before – that will be indelibly impressed on your mind.

Elodie Pong was born in the United States, raised in French-speaking Switzerland and is currently based in Zurich. She investigates odours as signifiers and metaphors for our liquid, fleeting times. Fragrances create nonverbal connections between people, things and places. But are they perhaps taking us for an olfactory ride? Are we living in a *Brave New World* of smell, befuddled by the perfume industry? Or – as the title of the show implies – does the olfactory universe harbour utopian and maybe even paradisiacal potential?

Three years ago the city of Zurich awarded Pong a studio stipend in New York. The artist took advantage of that opportunity to conduct intense olfactory research and has since been working on a film project about perfume and the sense of smell. While the *Invisible Project*, as she calls it, is more documentary in character, *Paradise Paradoxe* exploits the white(st) cubes of Helmhaus Zürich to pose artistic questions regarding an elusive subject: Pong has transformed the Helmhaus into an arena that oscillates between odour and rumour, provoking thoughts and perceptions, further stimulated by aggregate states that keep changing until even the institution itself begins to liquefy.

Foyer:

The exhibition is ushered in by a rumour: visitors are warned that a new scent is going to be permanently inscribed in their minds. What kind of scent? What is new about it? And why will we never be able to slough it off? The sense of smell is inseparably coupled with memory. "The first time you smell anything, your brain files the information forever," the wall text tells us. We will carry the synthetic molecules of smell that touch our receptors in the Helmhaus around with us in memory for the rest of our lives.

Gallery 1:

Elodie Pong's cautionary opening also tells us that we are permanently enveloped in an invisible architecture of smells. As an artist, she works primarily with visible architecture, even when the latter courts invisibility, since not only the walls of the Helmhaus but even the floors have been painted white. Elodie Pong emphasizes this by even having the foyer covered with a white floor. She simultaneously blurs and emphasizes the architecture of the first gallery by covering the window and the sources of light with coloured foil. Perhaps the alarming colour and sound are means of reinforcing the warning that we cannot escape smell. Perhaps the artist is re-calibrating our perception on entering the show – the exhibition gallery as a sluice for perception.

Gallery 2:

On the subtle rumour of a screen that is simultaneously transparent and opaque – another paradox, itself redolent of the exhibition's title based on the alliterative names of two fragrances – Pong confronts set pieces of current olfactory theory with dancing human bodies, themselves a concentrated source of a great variety of smells. The impact of smells is unfiltered: they are “a shortcut to the brain”, as one protagonist proclaims, while the transfer of visual stimuli to the brain requires the detour of a complex process. Another protagonist speaks in hashtags, a sign that identifies and facilitates searches in the social media: #liquid, #solid, #gaseous. Is “digital” soon going to be the only remaining aggregate state? And is smell the only one of the senses that is not dictated by the logic of hashtags?

In her sculptures – relatively new to this artist's oeuvre – Pong also lends fragile body to her thoughts on smell: some ingredients of perfume are now synthetically produced not only because they are easier to preserve but because some of the plants from which they were once extracted are threatened with extinction. In a similarly synthetic gesture, Pong cultivates imaginary replacements in a 3-D printer. The ideas are made manifest in walls a mere millimetre thick and in an ephemeral shimmer. These rumours of sculptures appear in the exhibition but at the same time, they still clearly persist in their digital aggregate state.

Gallery 3:

The next white cube even smells *WHITE*. In collaboration with the renowned scent investigator Roman Kaiser, Pong has created a fragrance that smells like the colour white – or rather the non-colour white, as the combination of all the colours of light. Does the curiously salty smell emanating from a small diffuser make the glaringly bright white, which is pragmatically heightened by potent neon light, even whiter? Can colour – or the entire exhibition space – alter the aggregate state, making it invisible but smellable? The smell of *WHITE* is subversive: it cannot be arrested by the boundaries of the white cube but instead slowly wafts through the entire Helmhaus and, of course, irrevocably into memory.

2nd Floor:

Gallery 4 (small room to the left):

While on the ground floor the aggregate states change back and forth in various directions, ultimately even liquefying the Helmhaus itself, Pong's first video upstairs, titled *180°*, liquefies the human body. Downstairs, a personal notion of the smell of white has been translated into a scent; here the protagonist of the video has used her expertise as a dancer to become scent *per se*. Thus, the actors and agents in *Paradise Paradoxe* grope their way, both literally and figuratively, toward the supposedly undepictable and intangible sphere of smell.

Gallery 5 (large room):

In another video piece, we see the *Liquid Sky* in a cube-shaped aggregate state – another paradox. And the *Power Plants*, although projected onto rectangular bodies of wood, also liquefy. They suffer the same fate as the plants ferreted out by the multibillion-dollar perfume industry, their scent analyzed, synthetically re-created and the result decanted into decorative flacons. A soundtrack lists the names on the flacons, from *Ambush* to *Burqa*; they are a leitmotif of the show, beginning with the title. And they are indispensable tools in the marketing of perfume, for they give names to something that cannot be expressed in words. Visual stimuli are more congenial to language but we soon capitulate when attempting to describe a smell. We therefore resort to placebo stories, which may be more – or less – redolent of paradise, but always have striking, evocative and highly marketable names.

Gallery 6:

The names of perfumes play a central role here as well. They are projected onto the wall just as randomly as the untold thousands of olfactory molecules that are permanently floating around us. The scent of a rose, for example, is made up of 275 different ingredients. A beamer mounted on a robot projects these names onto the wall or onto paper, the latter also like a placebo. A series of silkscreens made in 2013 – the only work not created specifically for this exhibition – attempts to capture smoke or steam. Barely visible, the cloudy air comes to light when the eye of the robot happens to be trained at the picture, so that representation of the fleeting cloud merges with the content of the projector – for instance, with the extremely suggestive perfume *Untold*.

Publication

The accompanying publication *Elodie Pong – Paradise Paradoxe*, Edition Patrick Frey, Zurich, is forthcoming in April. Designed by graphic artists Huber/Sterzinger, the book expands the theme of the exhibition with texts by philosopher Georg Kohler, gender theoretician Jack Halberstam, neuroscientist Andreas Keller, and many more (book launch, 14 April, 6:30 p.m.).

Events: Conversations, Videos, Performances and Concerts

Issues raised in the exhibition and in the book will also be discussed and investigated in a diverse and extremely enriching programme of events. The artist will speak with Bettina Steinbrügge, director of the Kunstverein in Hamburg (17 March, 6:30 p.m.) and with olfactory specialists – neuroscientist Andrea Keller and Sebastian Fischenich, founder of the perfume label Humiecki & Graef – in a programme titled “Smell Talk” (21 April, 6:30 p.m.). At the first edition of the new series of conversations, “Willkommen in der Problemzone! Ausstellungen machen – weh” [Welcome to the Problem Zone! Making Exhibitions Hurts], Elodie Pong will converse with curator Daniel Morgenthaler about making the exhibition (20 April, 5 p.m.). This conversation ushers in our new programme of talks among artists, technicians, office and reception staff, and curators about the joys and tribulations of mounting exhibitions.

In our regular programme of 5 o'clock Theses, Georg Kohler, professor of philosophy, will be confronted with the claim that “Gerüche sind ideale Metaphern für unsere flüssige Moderne” [Smells Are Ideal Metaphors for Our Liquid Modernity] (23 March, 5 p.m.). In our second 5 o'clock Thesis, chemist and olfactory scientist Roman Kaiser will speak about “Synthetische Duftstoffe sind natürlich immer von der Natur inspiriert” [Synthetic Aromas Are Naturally Always Inspired by Nature] (27 April, 5 p.m.). We also have the pleasure of announcing two video premieres: Luc Gut will show his work *OS LOVE* (31 March, 6:30 p.m.) and De La Fuente Oscar De Franco will present a film developed based on the Helmhaus exhibition “BLUECORE” in spring 2015 (28 April, 6:30 p.m.). Two concerts also chart surprising territory: Björn Magnusson & The Cold Fiction Rehearsal present improvised collages of rock music (16 March, 8:30 p.m.), and Dorit Chrysler will perform lyrical pop songs on the theremin, one of the oldest electronic musical instruments, invented in 1920 (9 April, 8:30 p.m.). In addition, the musicians will conduct workshops for children and adults.

For further details, see the invitation or visit www.helmhaus.org