

Haye, Christian.

"The Girl Who Fell to Earth: Christian Haye on Pipilotti Rist."

Frieze.

March/April 1998. pp. 62 - 65.

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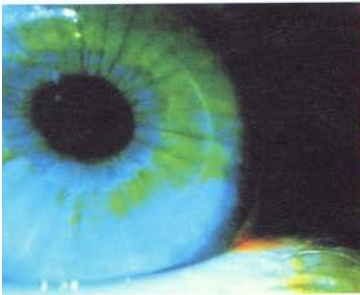
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THE GIRL WHO

Christian Haye on Pipilotti Rist

y: Rist Sisters Corp., Zürich



Courtesy: Luhring Augustine, New York



From left: L'Oeil 1994
Unselfish in the Bath of Lava 1994
Bloodclip 1993
Pimple Porno 1992
Video stills

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FELL TO EARTH

: Luhring Augustine, New York



“A remarkable child”, said one of the sailors as Pippi disappeared in the distance.

He was right. Pippi was indeed a remarkable child. The most remarkable thing about her was that she was so strong. She was so very strong that in the whole wide world there was not a single police officer as strong as she. Why, she could lift a whole horse if she wanted to! And she wanted to.’

– Astrid Lindgren, Pippi Longstocking (1945)

Over the last few years, cinema-goers have witnessed the ratio of narrative to running length decrease exponentially. It is almost as if the viewer is so acquainted with the various genres that any attempt at narrative structure seems redundant. In Wong Kar-wai's *Fallen Angels* (1995), for example, very little actually happens: the Hong Kong action genre is assumed, and the tone of the movie, rather than its story, becomes the driving force behind the cinematic experience. The meta-narratives that are so prevalent in film today have emerged from a public tired of the polemics of the medium.

In exceptionally individual ways, Matthew Barney, Steve McQueen and Pipilotti Rist have capitalised on this phenomenon, transforming the possibilities of the moving image in the visual arts arena. In his 'Cremaster' series, Barney's amor-phously macho avatars have revived such diverse genres as Opera, the Car Chase and the Busby Berkeley-style, hyper-produced Musical. McQueen has concentrated on the individual components of which films are comprised, with an encyclopaedic investigation of specific camera shots. Rist has arguably chosen a more difficult path by opening the floodgates of the high/low debate.

Popular music – in fact all music – has stubbornly refused an appearance in visual arts spaces. We usually discover collaborations between art and music in concert venues; when they do take place in a gallery, they are almost always reduced to a soundtrack for performance or to the status of background elevator musak. This undoubtedly has something to do with the class distinction that visual art holds dear. The upper class find it hard to commodify music to satisfy individual desire, popular music in particular. (The closest we come are those who collect music score sheets and the museums dedicated to musical history, but even here scholarship and intellectual interest are thought to be elitist.) But the age of the museum and the gallery as buttresses for the cultural goals of a solitary class are all but over. Almost half a century after cinema underwent a class upheaval comes the turn of the visual domain.

Rist's detractors, and there are many, often dismiss her work by likening it to MTV. The argument goes that music video is simply a commercial for a product, and so cannot be art; but the fact is that videos allow, far more than film, a solitary

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visionary to control all aspects of the moving image experience. Certainly Rist's interventions provide as worthy a place as any to reignite the high/low debate. One, *I'm Not the Girl Who Misses Much* (1986) presents Rist dancing around in what appears to be a fast-forwarded videotape, the soundtrack apparently consisting of a chipmunk repeating the title over and over again. With staccato cutting, Rist jumps around the frame, like a trapped maniac. Towards the end of the five minute loop, the sample from the Beatles' 'Happiness is a Warm Gun' reveals itself as the source. At this point Rist's reframing of the male gaze in popular music (and by default music videos in general) becomes apparent. In this work she flashes at the viewer, revealing a woman taking control, moving from objectified subject (as is the case with most popular love ballads) to author.

Rist later began to write her own music during a six year collaboration with Les Reines Prochaines, an all-grrrl band: her taste leans towards the lilting ballad accentuated with grunge shouting. She co-opted Chris Isaak's 'Wicked Game' for her 1996 video, *Sip My Ocean*, and then utilised a similar melody in composition of her own *Ever is Over All* (1997). In the latter, a woman strolls gaily down a street, swinging an overtly phallic flower at cars parked alongside. As the flower hits the car windows, they smash, to the horror of male passersby and to the approval of female ones. It is worth noting that the flower seems undamaged. Perhaps men are those suffering from pistil envy. In *Pickelporno* (1992) the

Asian dick seems to be missing in action in Western culture.)

What has become apparent as Rist's work develops is that her meta-narrative rests not solely on critiquing the elements of music video (erotica as represented by the ubiquity of the music video babe; editing and narrative propulsion based on musical rhythm; the staple performances as actor or as musician) but on subsuming music video as a genre in and of itself. Rist is interesting because she does not react – she invents. Elements of Pip style include copious use of ripe fruit, fluid underwater camera shots, low-grade special effects, editing that never supercedes the rhythmic tone, coarse lyrics that betray their ethereal theses and non-superfluous nudity. But before she boxed herself into her own canon, she disposed of all of these elements in *Shooting Divas* (1997). A reformulation of her own brand of grrrl power, the *Shooting Divas*

project consisted of ten female singers interpreting a composition of Rist's, shot in an extraordinarily plaintive style. The element shown at the 1997 Istanbul Biennale was performed by a Turkish singer whose range and tone made her a dead ringer for Janis Joplin. The installation also included a self-reflexive element: a documentary of the making of the video, layered in slides on top of the projection.

In her installations, Rist examines how we view the moving image. One reason for the lethargy of film's introduction into the arena of high art is its conglomerate nature of production. The other reason is the difference between the spaces where we view 'high' art and those of popular entertainment. Cinema, in its nascent stages, grappled with this conflict until economics prevailed, an aspect that has been glossed over in the hoopla surrounding film's centenary. Turn-of-the-

Courtesy: Luhring Augustine, New York



camera rolls fluidly over two bodies, one an Asian male the other a white female. Here Rist challenges traditional gender-stratifying erotica like Marguerite Duras' *The Lover* (1984), changing the tone of the ballad without ignoring post-colonial realities as she successfully eroticises the Asian male body without castrating it. (As Richard Fung noted in his essay 'Where is my Penis?' (1992),

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Rist's attraction to video is based on its inherently eclectic nature. Performance, installation, musical composition and the hyperactivity of composing a multitude of visual images are all accessed in each piece. Like Pippi Longstocking, Rist can do it. And she wants to.

century nickelodeons and movie houses were geared towards the lower classes. The bourgeoisie was not comfortable mingling in dark spaces with the unwashed masses until theatres such as the gilt-laden Strand in New York were built in the 30s. This stigma stubbornly persists. Museums and art spaces still present a problem for artists whose work is unabashedly centred on the moving image.

Many, like McQueen, William Kentridge or Bill Viola favour the black box video projection approach. Barney has straddled the space dichotomy by recreating the traditional movie theatre seating in an art space, showing his work in cinemas and by allowing the viewer to experience some of the physical elements of the film sets in gallery installations.

Rist, in contrast, has tackled the problem

From left: *The Social Life of Rose or Why I'm Never Sad* 1994 (with Samir)
Sip My Ocean 1996
Pimple Porno 1992
The Body Letter 1992
Sexy Sad I 1987
Shooting Divas 1996
 Video stills



Courtesy, Rist Sitem Corp., Zurich

head-on by questioning the way we view the moving image. Installations such as *The Room* (1994) was familiar to those born with the television as baby-sitter by installing fabulously oversized furniture as the viewing arena for her video. To emphasise her self-abjection, she sank *Unselfish in the Bath of Lava* (1992) into the floor, as if beneath every art space is a private hell. *Flying Room* (1995) transformed the tedium of the bank in which it was installed into a private fantasy land invoking a living room – the height of banal domestic comfort – which mocked the institutional banality that those queuing for cashiers were forced to endure.

Rist's attraction to video is based on its inherently eclectic nature. Performance, installation, musical composition and the hyperactivity of composing a multitude of visual images are all accessed in each piece. Like Pippi Longstocking, Rist can do it. And she wants to. In *Pearls of Time* (1994), we find a naked Rist crouching on a floor, peering up at a camera suspended above. As she opens her mouth the camera drops down into it and the image fades to black. As the film fades up again, the camera pulls away from Rist's arse, returning to its original position as the cycle prepares to loop endlessly. In Rist's world there are no binaries and choices, just endless systems which are organic, horrific, humorous and scandalous. And if this is a wasteland, so be it. This is where we are.