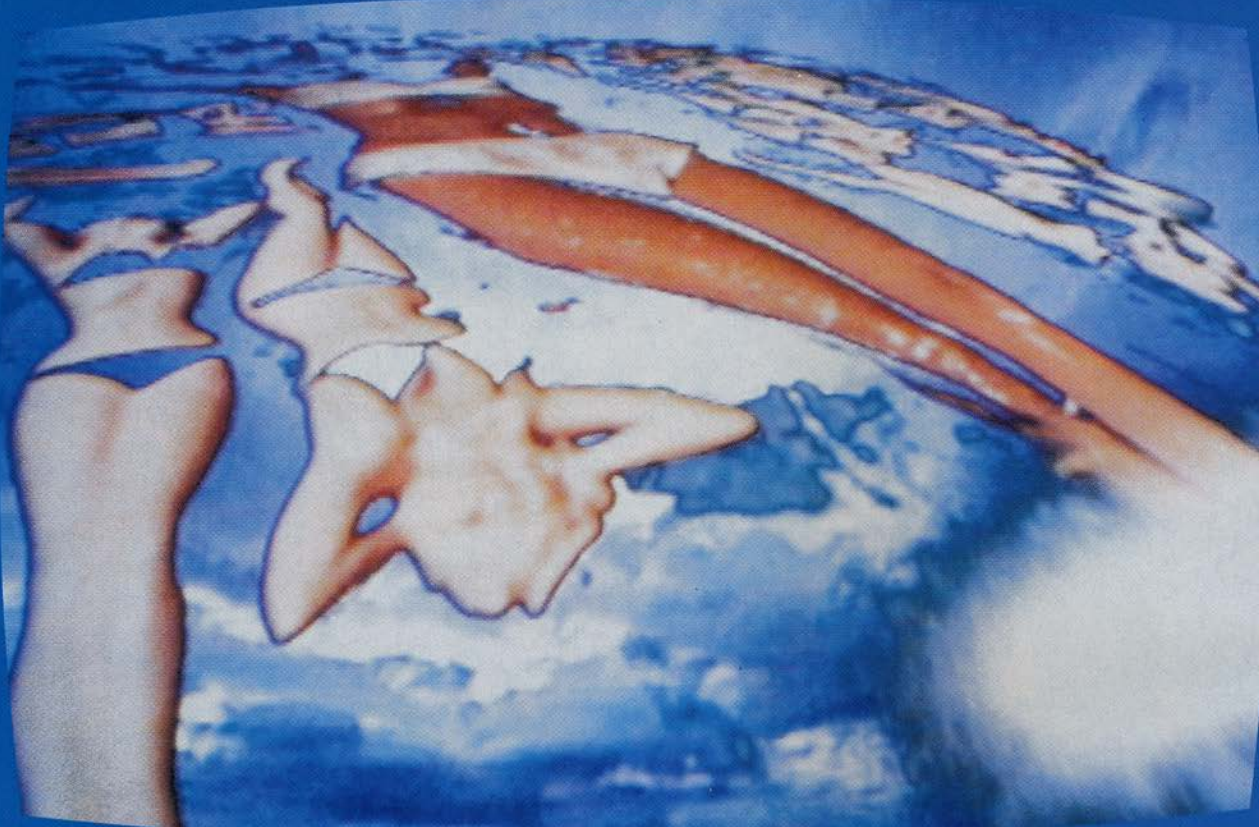


Erdmann Ziegler, Ulf  
"Rist Factor"  
Art in America  
June 1998, pp. 80 - 83.

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## Rist Factor



Pipilotti Rist: *I'm a Victim of This Song*, 1995, five-minute videotape. All photos courtesy Galerie Hauser & Wirth, Zurich.

### BY ULF ERDMANN ZIEGLER

**T**he sudden prominence of Pipilotti Rist, one of the six finalists for this year's Hugo Boss Prize, has come as a surprise to some art-world observers. During the past decade the Swiss artist has turned out more than 60 video installations and 16 films and videos, many of them memorable. But her work has often been regarded as too glitzy and pop-oriented, verging on MTV fare. A recent survey exhibition at the Hamburger Bahnhof, the contemporary branch of Berlin's Nationalgalerie, helped to bring Rist's esthetic into sharper focus. It presented visitors with an impressive group of works that ranged from large-scale video-projection environments like the new *Remake of the Weekend* to an intimate installation featuring a tiny, half-hidden monitor.

Asked once whether she doesn't belong more to the world of pop-music videos than to the art world, Rist answered, "I have the greatest respect for some MTV clips, since they have a power of innovation and a spirit of discovery that really surpasses video art." Visually, her most astonishing accomplishment has been her fusion of the calculated "mistakes" and distortions of experimental video and the brash, slick ambiance of music-video clips.

Such pop-culture references come to Rist naturally. During the early 1980s she studied graphic design and photography at Vienna's Academy of Applied Art, then specialized in audiovisual production at the School of Design in Basel. At the outset of her career she made animated cartoons and stage sets for music videos, and for eight years she played drums and bass in an all-girl band called Les Reines Prochaines (The Next Queens). In the second half of the '80s, often acting as her own scriptwriter, camera operator, performer and editor, she began to produce a series of video works that established the hallmarks of her approach: eccentric costumes, technical experimentation with the video image, and a coyly teasing attitude reflected in titles such as *Sexy Sad I*, *Pimple Porno* and *Absolution: Pipilotti's Mistakes*.

In these works Rist employs the language of pop culture not so much to tell stories as to devise emblems—emblems of femininity in which clichés of freedom and subjugation are curiously, seamlessly joined. In one of her early videos, *I'm Not the Girl Who Misses Much* (1986), she appears as a hysterical blonde wearing a little black dress. Through what seems a pane of frosted glass, we see

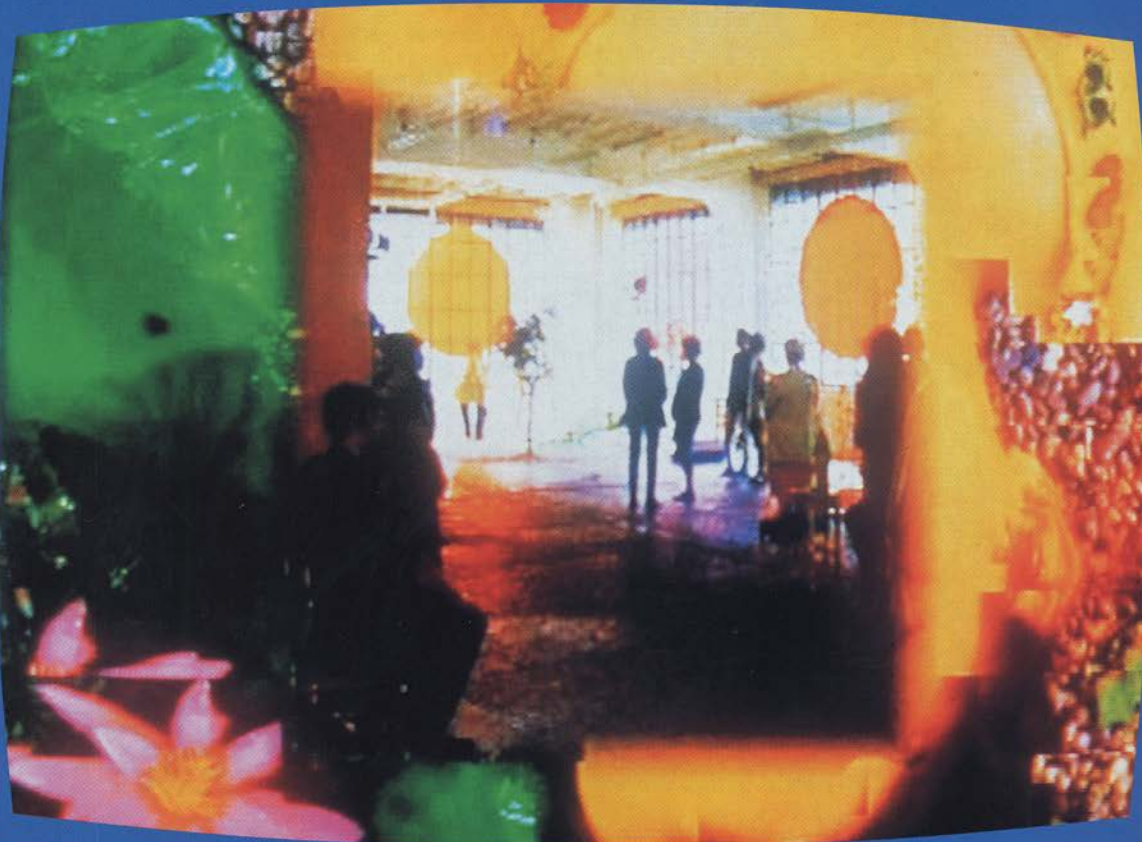


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*A traveling European exhibition surveys the video installations of Swiss artist Pipilotti Rist, who uses a bold pop-culture idiom to pursue an unabashedly feminine vision.*



*Shooting Divas, 1996. All images this article, unless otherwise noted, are stills from the artist's videotapes or installations.*

her blurry body dancing wildly, breasts bobbing; she incessantly repeats, in a voice electronically speeded up or slowed down, a slightly altered line from a Beatles song. (In an interview Rist has said, "As a girl I dreamed that I was the reincarnation of John Lennon.") Surprisingly, the wavy figure with the mismatched voice is not laughable, but immediately engages our sympathy.

**R**ist's Berlin exhibition, "Remake of the Weekend," was spread over two levels of the museum in order to minimize sound spill between the larger installations. On the ground floor, *Ever Is Over All* (1997), a slow-motion video diptych which won Rist the Premio 2000 prize at last year's Venice Biennale, was projected onto the adjacent walls of a gallery corner. As a hypnotic music loop plays, we see a carefree young woman strolling down a city street and blithely smashing auto windshields with a long-stemmed flower; meanwhile, the companion panel is filled with close-ups of vibrantly hued blossoms in an exotic garden.

In other darkened spaces on the ground floor were three video-projection works that each center on the female body. In a room painted an unobtrusive

red, *Blue Bodily Letter* (1992) was beamed onto a wall at an angle, creating an elongated wedge. The work opens with a woman's head seen in close-up, her eyes and mouth covered with glass jewelry. The camera travels rapidly down her naked body, which is similarly bedecked with jewelry around the neck and genitals. Moving past her feet, the camera pulls back to reveal her body stretched out like a corpse in a forest. A quick pivot of the lens brings bright treetops into view—a sign of a heavenward journey? Then the camera begins again at the woman's head and retraces the same circuit, although Rist does not repeat the earlier footage but employs variant takes. The overall effect is that of a giant, ghostly hand brushing the length of the body and then suddenly withdrawing from it.

In a narrow, blue-lit corridor just opposite, another projection work, *Blood Space* (1993/98), was squeezed between two toilet doors. Here, too, a camera travels down a woman's body, but this time she is undressing, at length revealing a white, ankle-length slip on which a bright red spot is visible. A pair of patent-leather shoes appear, whose lipstick-red hue rhymes visually with the flow



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*I'm Not the Girl Who Misses Much, four-minute videotape, 1986.*



*Pimple Porno, twelve-minute videotape, 1992.*

**In her tapes and installations, Rist fuses the calculated technical "mistakes" of experimental video and the slick ambiance of MTV clips.**

What is remarkable is the way that Rist is able to cite so many clichés of sexualized femininity and at the same time remain completely out of reach. Thus she can sit on the floor dressed as a blonde with a clownlike face and gaze up fearlessly at the observer. This attitude is underscored by the name that Rist has devised for herself, a combination of her childhood nickname, Lotti, and Pipi—from Pippi Longstocking. Created by Swedish author Astrid Lindgren in 1945, this nine-year-old tomboy with red pigtails and mismatched stockings is the daughter of an angel and a pirate. Smart and sassy, instinctively defiant of all authority, she is so strong that she can easily defeat bullies and lift a horse—and she remains a child.

Pipilotti Rist has taken the character of the pert, eccentric girl who triumphs in every situation and transformed her into a grown woman, whom the artist herself often portrays. Her style of exaggerated feminine role-playing is sometimes pushed to the brink of grotesquerie. (Cindy Sherman can be imagined as one godmother of this enterprise, the German rock diva Nina Hagen as another.) In an interview, she says, "I would be happy if young girls who have their first period see it as an occasion for loud rejoicing. Bring the blood out into the open, show this red fluid, this wonderful sap." With *Bloodclip* (1993), a two-minute work made for Swiss TV, she did precisely this.

Recently named artistic director of Expo 2001 in Neuchâtel—the first great world exhibition to take place in Switzerland since 1964—Rist is developing a vision of a multidisciplinary *Gesamtkunstwerk*. "The idea is to allow the visitor a philosophical or sensual journey in which art, technology, and science are connected in different expressive forms. I also want a lively mix of physical, intellectual, and emotional nourishment, as of 'high' and 'popular' culture."<sup>1</sup> This could be a good description of her own art, too, and the exhilarating mix of ideas and images that it offers to the viewer. □

—translated by Christopher Phillips

1. "Rist for the Mill: Hans-Ulrich Obrist Talks with Pipilotti Rist," *Artforum*, April 1998, p. 45.

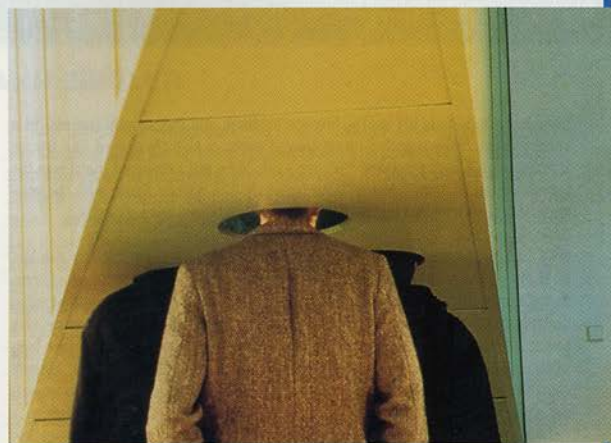
"Remake of the Weekend" was organized by Berlin's Hamburger Bahnhof, where it opened March 14-June 1. The exhibition travels to the Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna [June 26-Aug. 30], Le Magasin, Grenoble [Oct. 18, 1998-Jan. 17, 1999], and the Kunsthalle Zurich [Jan. 16-Mar. 14, 1999]. A 131-page catalogue accompanies the show. Rist's work will be on view at the Guggenheim SoHo [June 24-Sept. 20, 1998] in an exhibition featuring the finalists for the Hugo Boss Prize.

Author: Ulf Erdmann Ziegler is a free-lance critic based in Berlin.

of menstrual blood that we soon see coursing down the body. As the camera climbs back toward the woman's head, blood is gushing everywhere in exaggerated, horror-movie fashion.

Those disconcerted by *Blood Space* were likely to be dumbfounded by *Mutaflo* (1996), which was projected down onto a gallery's stone floor. Again the opening image is that of a woman's body—this time a blonde with bright red lips and wide, childlike eyes. We see her first from above, as she sits naked on the floor in an unfurnished room, surrounded by a carefully laid-out pattern of croissants and oranges. The camera lingers on her face, closing in on her dark red tongue just before the scene suddenly grows dark. The same color reappears a moment later, but you need a second to realize that what is now pictured is an anus; this is confirmed when the camera zooms back out to the original overhead viewpoint. Here, as elsewhere, Rist introduced a calculated irritation into the installation: the ideal spot for observing the projection was directly in front of a felt curtain through whose folds visitors kept fumbling in from another part of the exhibition.

The works at the Hamburger Bahnhof suggest that Rist's most surprising strength as an artist may be her ability to elicit a sense of identification from the viewer, whether male or female. You effortlessly imagine yourself in the place of the glass-jewelry-adorned Ophelia in *Blue Bodily Letter*, marvel at the signs of menstruation in *Blood Space* and enter into the mood of insouciant anarchy that surrounds Rist's auto vandal like a summer breeze. In *Mutaflo*, the camera eye that wanders over the body from mouth to anus is finally absorbed by the prevailing mood of autoeroticism; narcissism overcomes voyeurism.



*Installation view of A Peak into the North—A Look into the East, 1992, at Galerie Franck & Schulte, Berlin. Photo Damian Grieder.*



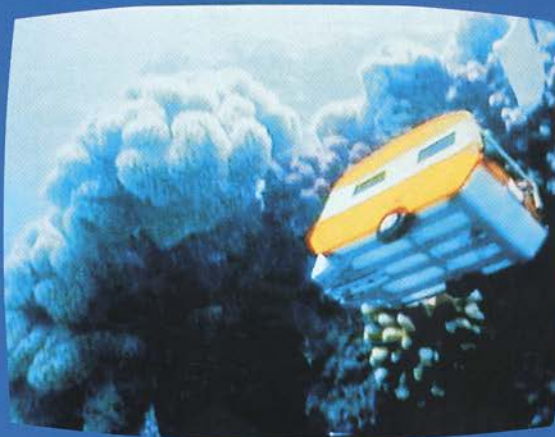
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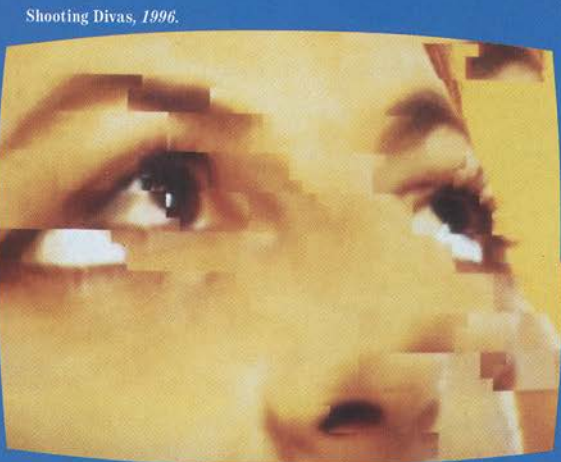
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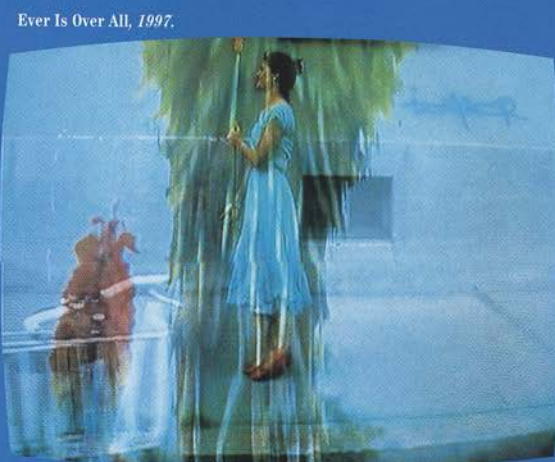
*Selfless in the Bath of Lava, 1994.*



*Sip My Ocean, 1996.*



*Shooting Divas, 1996.*



*Ever Is Over All, 1997.*



*Remake of the Weekend (Firetable), 1998.*



*Pamela, 1997.*