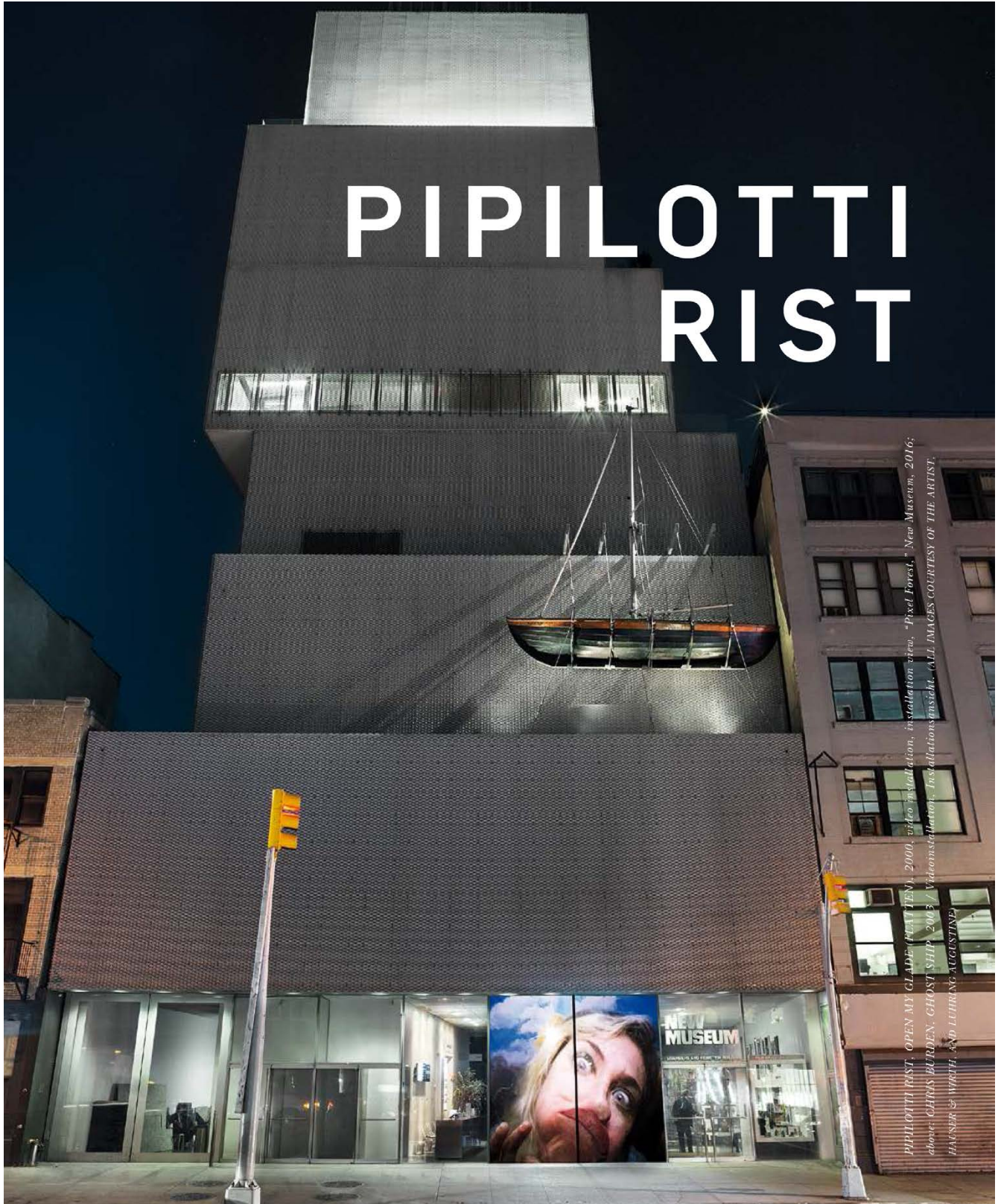


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PIPILOTTI RIST, OPEN MY GLADE (PLATYEN), 2000, video installation, installation view, "Pixel Forest," New Museum, 2016;  
above: CHRIS BURDEN, GHOST SHIP, 2003, Videomontage, installation view, "ALL IMAGES COURTESY OF THE ARTIST."  
HAUNER & WIRTH, AND LUHRING AUGUSTINE

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*Pipilotti Rist*

JULIANA ENGBERG

# Thoughts Grow in Me Like a Forest

PIXELWALD (Pixel Forest, 2016) is made up of thousands of electric-powered baubles, like small meteor rocks dispersed in a cosmic shower. Emanating light and color—pinks, blues, reds, orange, green, as well as darker shades of brown, magenta, and crimson—they fragment and disorient experience, exploding an image that can only be comprehended from a great distance. Their tantalizing, crystalline festooning invites you to enter into a magical fairy-tale forest, but for all their festivity, they seem jaggedly dangerous. As in most fairy tales, the journey into the forest must be taken with care, for once in its midst, you might lose your way. This could be Dante’s dark wood of chaotic matter, where the self is obscured and the right path out must be negotiated.

The immersive environment of PIXEL FOREST is a more melancholic place than Pipilotti Rist’s usual pastoral, and it strikes a Jungian tone. As Jung observed, “Thoughts grow in me like a forest, populated by many different animals. But man is dominating in his thinking, and therefore he kills the

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JULIANA ENGBERG is Programme Director for European Capital of Culture Aarhus 2017.



PIPILOTTI RIST, *PIXELWALD MOTHERBOARD (PIXELFOREST MUTTERPLATTE)*, 2016, multi-channel video installation with sound, forest of hanging, custom-made and programmed LED lights, pixel patch, routers, transformers, player, 35 min., installation view, New Museum, New York, 2016 / Mehrkanal-Videoinstallation mit Ton, Wald hängender, massgefertigter und programmierter LED-Lichter, Router, Transformatoren, Abspielgerät, Installationsansicht.



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*Pipilotti Rist*

*PIPILOTTI RIST, PIXELWALD MOTHERBOARD (PIXELFOREST  
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pleasure of the forest and that of the wild animals. Man is violent in his desire, and he himself becomes a forest and a forest animal. Just as I have freedom in the world, I also have freedom in my thoughts. Freedom is conditional.”<sup>1)</sup> Rist’s work always has an ethical twist: There are choices to be made and a balance to be maintained, here viewed via the metaphor of a spectacular forest.

The expansive survey “Pipilotti Rist: Pixel Forest” opened at the New Museum, New York, in fall 2016, in the final days before the US presidential election. At the time, a nervous foreboding had entered into the psyche of the world; we were disoriented, and our ethical and moral compasses were tested. Rist’s forest, in sympathy with these darkening political days, seemed less a therapeutic elixir than a symbol of a potential, dangerous turn of events. Whether it was the national circumstances or the claustrophobia of the museum spaces, her work struck a more disquieting tone than usual.

Where Rist once offered a sinless, light-filled Eden—as seen in the playground of frolicking nymphs and fecund fruits captured in her 2005 video installation *HOMO SAPIENS SAPIENS*—her newest works show paradise submerged in a swamp of hazardous, dangerous tangles and breathless depths. Although viewers lie on beds and cushions to gaze upward at the biomorphically shaped screens of *4<sup>TH</sup> FLOOR TO MILDNESS* (2016), the images evoke liquid heavy with organic matter, only allowing glimpses of the sky and land beyond. Visitors to the New Museum’s fourth floor first passed a neon sign that read *PLEASE HELP ME* (2017) before stretching out at the bottom of this pond. A song by the Austrian musician Anja Plaschg (aka Soap & Skin), “Spiracle,” gives *4<sup>TH</sup> FLOOR TO MILDNESS* a desperate, suffocating edge:



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*PIPILOTTI RIST, 4<sup>TH</sup> FLOOR TO MILDNESS, 2016, 4-channel video installation with sound, projectors, players, 2 amorphous panels suspended horizontally from the ceiling, single and double beds, pillows and covers, 6 min. 20 sec., 7 min. 3 sec., 8 min. 11 sec., 8 min. 11 sec., installation view, New Museum, 2016 / 4-Kanal-Videoinstallation mit Ton, Projektoren, Abspielgeräte, 2 horizontal montierte amorphe Paneele, Einfach- und Doppelbetten, Kissen und Deckbetten, Installationsansicht.*

*When I was a child  
Fears pushed me hard in my head  
In my neck  
In my chest  
In my waist  
I never loved  
I still beg  
Please help me*

This plea for help from a child, emerging from the deep darkness, was incredibly disturbing. From time

to time, a fragmented body came into view above, through reeds and leaves, but this is not the water naiad of previous works such as TYNGDKRAFT, VAR MIN VÂN (Gravity, Be My Friend, 2007), who impishly attends the viewer, providing proof of a viable life-aquatic. The body in the New Museum installation was instead at the mercy of the pond's own life force—cold, agitated, capricious, and perilous. We could see her goose bumps and feel the chill, worrying how she would escape up to the water's continually obscured surface.

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Exhibitions have memories embedded in them. Some visitors to the New Museum would have remembered Rist's extravagant and bountiful projection that washed across the Atrium of New York's Museum of Modern Art several years ago. In *POUR YOUR BODY OUT* (7354 CUBIC METERS) (2008), Rist provided a spectacle of blooming pink tulips and trippy psychedelic abstractions, the harvests of fruits and the antics of gleeful gluttony. Despite this optimistic, colorful vision, a trickle of blood appears momentarily amid the fantasia, an almost subliminal appearance. Rist's work has always contained an element of pain alongside pleasure, and blood is a reminder of the life force. In her life-size, cutout self-portrait *THE HELP* (2004), a limited edition for *Parkett* 71, a streak of blood runs from underneath her red polka-dot dress all the way down one leg into her red shoe—matching the red knee-high sock on her other leg. In this defiant, provocative work, Rist becomes Our Lady of Red, a self-anointed patron saint of the female flow.



PIPILOTTI RIST, *I'VE ONLY GOT EYES FOR YOU*—(PIN DOWN JUMP UP GIRL), 1996, 3-D image, color photograph under lenticulated film, mounted on flexible plastic, 4 suction cups, 8 1/4 x 11", Edition for *Parkett* / 3-D-Bild, Farbphotographie unter Lenticularrasterfolie, aufgezogen auf flexiblem Kunststoff, 4 Saugnäpfe, 20,8 x 27,8 cm.

In contrast to previous presentations of Rist's work, the New Museum survey permitted a more mature encounter, demonstrating her technological trajectories and presenting her more anarchistic and melancholic registers. While *4TH FLOOR TO MILDNESS* was the undertow and underbelly of the retrospective, *OPEN MY GLADE (FLATTEN)* (2000), shown on the glass storefront facade of the New Museum, indicates another sort of brutality that often goes unrecognized or unmentioned in discussions of the artist's imagery. Here Rist's face appears larger than life-size, like Alice in Wonderland, her face pressed against the window of the screen, peering out at passers-by on the Bowery. It is hard to escape the corporeal crush of this work—the disturbing torture of flesh and cartilage being smushed and smeared across the glass membrane, in a kind of self-humiliation and punishment. This is not a cute work: It destroys the possibility of a simple, objectifying gaze and indicates a kind of hyper-confinement, placing it in the company of endurance works by Abramović and Nauman.

Confinement or entrapment has always preoccupied Rist. One of her most powerfully melancholic pieces is *VORSTADTHIRN (SUBURB BRAIN)* (1999), a miniature model of a house with garage and patio, on which three small-scale videos are projected. Bathed in nocturnal light, this diorama of domesticity suggests childhood, vulnerability, and doubt. The scene is mundane yet uncannily, horrifically aflame, and it provides the *mise en scène* for a ruminative monologue that meanders through topics such as aesthetics, love, poetics, nature, cars, and loss—loss of the other as well as oneself: “I am a birch tree”; “redirect poetry back to metaphysics, physics, and ethics”; “only you in love, glancing in slow motion, seem like a trap to me.” In the videos, Rist drives a car through the landscape, inventing a manifesto of survival and defiance—“my blood is boiling.”

The television is a cage for Rist's wilder side in *I'VE ONLY GOT EYES FOR YOU (PIN DOWN JUMP UP GIRL)*, a 1996 edition for *Parkett* 48. In this color lenticular, to be attached to a TV screen via four suction cups, the artist is a feral imp who has stolen the remote control from the fathers of video art, waking up the couch potato lazily vegging out in front of the TV.



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Indeed, watching older monitor works such as the iconic I'M NOT THE GIRL WHO MISSES MUCH (1986) or (ENTLASTUNGEN) PIPILOTTIS FEHLER ([Absolutions] Pipilotti's Mistakes, 1988), we sense that even in her early, experimental phase, Rist already wanted to break free of the frame of the TV set or screen. She makes use of its containment to explore limits, to explode the image from within, to rupture and disrupt it, to play with video anarchy and static. The images bloop and scratch, rewind, and whirl in pixel disruption; they disappear from the frame, un-synch, and overlay. At the New Museum, however, viewers were required to place their heads within cones that protruded from the wall, restricting their movement and demanding their concentration on these relics of video rebellion—a museological approach to historical work.

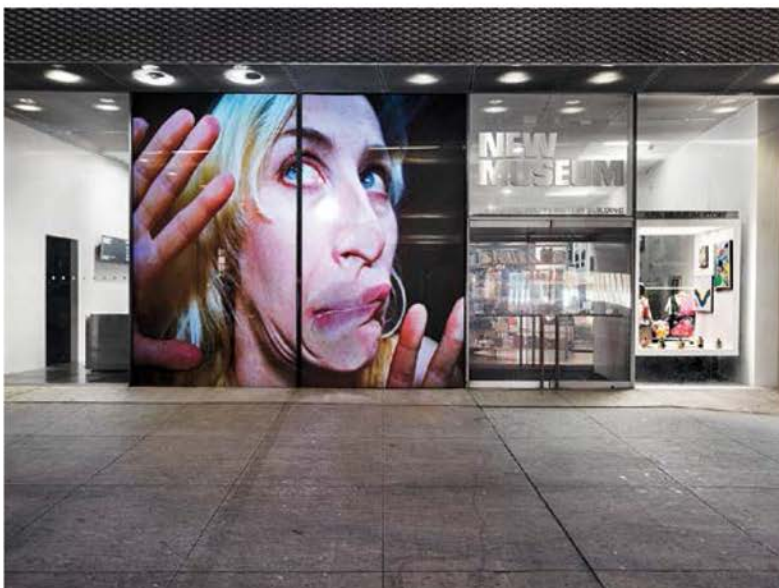
Yet Rist's philosophy has always been to activate the viewer. In “Pixel Forest,” museum visitors rarely had a passive role or encountered a work that did not shift their body in some way—physically, perceptually, or phenomenologically. The body, for instance, was caressed and ventilated in the gossamer labyrinth of ADMINISTRATING ETERNITY (2011), wandering through gently moving curtains projected with video

of Swiss hills, domestic scenes, and abstract patterns. The body was invited to snuggle and stretch on thick carpet to absorb the earthly travels and watery twinning of <MERCY GARDEN> FROM THE MERCY WORK FAMILY and <WORRY WILL VANISH HORIZON> FROM THE WORRY WORK FAMILY (both 2014). Standing beneath CAPE COD CHANDELIER (2011), the body was displaced as the viewer contemplated tiers of underwear filled with light, splendidly hovering like an alien spaceship.

Viewers might have remained motionless while watching EVER IS OVER ALL (1999), riveted by the brazen escapade of a maiden smashing car windows. But inside, they could feel the ecstatic release of its mischievous feminist humor, this joyful victory over law, patriarchy, and passivity.<sup>2)</sup> A triumphant, blissful bubble of civil disobedience, EVER IS OVER ALL reads as a fearless salvo against the turning of the tide, one that would pull us under and drag us down into its muddy, murky depths—unless we stand defiant.

1) C. G. Jung, *The Red Book: A Reader's Edition* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2012), 192.

2) As I have previously written, this feminist smashing recalls the writing of Hélène Cixous. See “The Laugh of the Medusa,” trans. Keith and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1, no. 4 (Summer 1976): 875–93.



PIPILOTTI RIST, *OPEN MY GLADE*  
(*FLATTEN*), 2000, video installation,  
installation view, New Museum, 2016 /  
Videoinstallation, Installationsansicht.

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*PIPILOTTI RIST, VORSTADTHIRN (SUBURB BRAIN), 1999, projections onto a model of a suburban residential area, various objects, sound,  
installation view, New Museum, 2016 / Projektionen auf das Modell eines städtischen Wohngebiets, verschiedene Gegenstände, Ton, Installationsansicht.*





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