

Pipilotti Rist Adventures Close to Home

John Slyce

Passion that shouts
and red with anger
I lost myself
Through alleys of mysteries
I went up and down
like a demented train.

Don't take it personal
I choose my own fate
I follow love
I follow hate.

Searching for something
that makes hearts move
I found myself.
But my best possession
walked into the shade
and threatened to drift away.

Don't take it personal
I choose my own fate
I follow love
I follow hate.

Full of myself
I left you behind
as if I could,
possessed by Quixote's dream
went to fight dragons
in the land of concrete.

Don't take it personal
I choose my own fate
I follow love
I follow hate.

Rolling in pain
discovered what hurts
and tasted hell
infatuated by madness
I danced in flames
and drunk in the depth of love.

Adventures Close to Home
The Raincoats, 1979

'Ons hoofd is rond zodat onze gedachten
van richting kunnen veranderen.'
Francis Picabia, 1922

Before me, as I write, is a colour print of Markus Huber's phenomenal schematic plan of Pipilotti Rist's exhibition at Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen. It is dated 05.01.2009. Huber

is referred to lovingly and with a touch of awe as Mr 3D in Rist's Zurich studio. A wildly collaborative ethos fills the space, which is, I sense, given over in equal parts and with permeable boundaries to domestic technologies, the trappings of a cottage industry and family entertainment. Much work happens there, but so too a lot of fun. This is apparent and even travels down a telephone line between Zurich and London. More is directly revealed in conversations with Pipilotti. Rist is stunning in her spirit, energy and the bounds of her candid generosity, not to mention her sincerity, which is tangible whether speaking with her face to face or mediated by electronic forms of communication. All this is uncommonly rare for art stars and perhaps less so, though still sadly too often true for us humans alike.

The keys blush as I write the previous two sentences. But really they shouldn't.

The genuine qualities that characterize Rist's person are, for me, already present in her art. The Zen-like ambient humanism that lends shape to her relations with people and the world is, after all, mirrored in the 'amorphous screens' that couple and join with her video projections. It is all stated as a proposition and ideal to which art and we – both as individuals and as a collective – might aspire. Maybe even utopian stirrings can be discerned in such acts to break down and break free of squares and the rectangular. And yet such desires are an indelible feature of what makes up the architecture of our heads and heart. When we forget as much, we fail to be truly human.

Stop. I've got ahead of myself while I drifted and then deviated from the tone and domain of the standard catalogue essay. And I meant to. Let me begin again. Not to return to an established model, but to carry on as before in an even more direct and concise manner. Pipilotti Rist does not need another catalogue or an essay. There are plenty and very good examples available. My writing here aims to offer something complementary and parallel to the work that will provide a framework of ideas to structure the experience of Pipilotti Rist's exhibition at Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen. Sjarel Ex, director of the museum, and I discussed early on what ground I might cover in an essay. We both agreed that much writing on Rist's work had not engaged with a violent element evident at least at the level of the image and occasionally in the content. An essay around that approach began to take form, but I scrapped it as soon as I met with Pipilotti and our conversations started to explore what she was planning for this show. A heavy survey essay that sought to reposition her work or engaged with previous writings and critical readings seemed inappropriate and off the mark. None of those approaches seemed to address what was actually at stake in the work and its presentation for either maker or receiver. What felt right was a change of mind.

I am not certain if what you are holding in your hands is a flipbook, since the design is not finished and the catalogue is yet to be produced. That was one early

possibility. I am pretty sure the book will not be round. Rist and I agreed, jokingly yet with all due seriousness, that that shape would be a perfect fit for the work and this show, if not for a book on a shelf. None of us can be sure what tomorrow will bring. Pipilotti Rist may give up art for something else. Sjarel Ex may find himself playing in goal for Feyenoord. Whatever happens to me, you, or any of us, great adventures await and are nearer than we only rarely dare to imagine. Let us begin.

This then – both the book and, fundamentally, the exhibition – is a collaborative project in which you are very much included. Each usually is. The question remains to what degree? And to what ends or purposes? Beyond the collaborative conditions of Rist's practice and studio – with its refined and democratic re-division of labours and their product – I want to communicate the degree to which you are considered not only as partner and participant in the work but are, in fact, a significant part – perhaps the most significant part – of the work's make-up. For too long I related to and engaged with Pipilotti Rist's art as video. While no doubt still productive, this position is fundamentally passive rather than an active one. While film and video continue to lend a great deal to the vocabulary of Rist's work and the materiality of its image, it is in and through installation that Rist taps the immersive qualities of video, with its mesmeric 'total flow', and redeploys those properties to potentially radical effect. Our presence and participation in the space of the projected image is the conditional component. We are the elixir that may render the terms video, installation, or even social sculpture obsolete and banal in reference to the totality of the experience of Rist's art.

I want to return to Markus Huber's beautiful plan. It is there for you to see amongst these pages. A song is playing from my computer as I look at it. I've set it to repeat. It is an old song, but one that still sounds fresh and immediate, by a post-punk or new wave band of women called The Raincoats. The title is 'Adventures Close to Home' and it has been present and part of every iteration of this essay. Sound and song – the auditory – has a powerful effect on the visual and can rewrite an image and reorganise its meaning. The speed of recognition triggered by sound is immediate – primordial even – and instinctively felt by our perceiving body. At least for me, sound and song have the ability to evoke deep memories of place and space with a fidelity unmatched by the visual. Perhaps the song came forward as some kind of sympathetic surrogate for Rist's former band Les Reines Prochaines. I shared the song with Pipilotti and certainly the title shaped a significant element of our discussions. Song and plan come together as sound and image. If I once thought of works like I'm Not the Girl Who Misses Much (1986) or You Called Me Jacky (1990) as bouncing up against the form of the music video, increasingly I relate to the union of audio and visual components in Rist's work more as a sound poem – a far more intimate coupling.

The third and final element to put in place now is the quote from Picabia. I first encountered it in German on a postcard sent by a friend celebrating yet another May Day in Warszawa: 'Unser Kopf ist rund, damit das Denken die Richtung wechseln kann'. At a certain shared moment when we were discussing Huber's

plan, both Pipilotti and I reached instinctively for the Picabia quote. The line directly speaks to the architecture of the head and arrived in our memories while we were talking about breaking down and free of the rectangular box. This is a move Rist made early in her videos as they resisted and attacked the limitations and frame of the monitor. Later, the materiality of her video image spread with a liquid intelligence to the amoebic 'amorphous screen'. Reconciling sound, song and image resonates with an area of primary concern in Rist's work: how to reconcile thinking and the body. We are never more at home than when in our own bodies. What can be more domestic than the body? And yet, when we do find ourselves suddenly at home, how often do we feel a tourist in a foreign land?

Early in January, when this year had only just started, Pipilotti set a research question for her studio to work on. Her speculative hope was that the relation of one atom or molecule of our body would have a balanced and equal correlation to that of a body and the universe. The studio quickly discovered that the universe is vaster than expected. I could sense when she related this anecdote that Pipilotti was genuinely disappointed with their findings. Our brain is, all the same, a planet. And our heads are round so that our thinking can change direction. Huber's plan is a schematic map of a universe and organism you enter as if pouring yourself into your own skin. After taking off your shoes, it should feel like an adventure close to home.

One more brief distraction before moving on... I was fortunate to visit MoMA in New York late in 2008 and experience Rist's *Pour Your Body Out* (7354 Cubic Meters) (2008) as installed in that museum's magnificent atrium. The visual material that filled the 25-foot walls of the atrium came from the same film family as Rist's 80-minute feature film *Pepperminta*, set to premiere in 2009. Rist revisits works and reshapes material so that each piece is specific as it relates to and inhabits a site. The effect of *Pour Your Body Out* on the ambient space of the atrium was deeply sympathetic to the architecture, while still rewriting the behaviour, movement, flow and activities of visitors. It was their active engagement in the installation that redefined the space: whether reclining on or catapulting across the iris-shaped sofa, stretching, singing, or dancing, bodies were enlightened and moved in a manner uncommon to a museum without sacrificing or jettisoning the contemplative or potentially self-reflexive product of art. What I witnessed and experienced was active – more a performance under the conditions of video than the type of absorption levied on brains and bodies by the spectacle of electronic media in our homes.

The experience shifted my understanding and appreciation of Pipilotti Rist's art. In earlier work, particularly that in which she performs herself, I read and recognised her body not as image, nor as constituting a part of the image, but as a body in the space of a video/image. Moving now, as Rist has in recent years, to a more directorial mode, has opened up that position for a viewer to assume. Film – and video, particularly as Rist handles it – encompasses space, becomes space and finally is space in which to perform, experience and act equal to any other.

Art is a social practice and always already a spatial practice inside our heads, in the museum, on the streets and in the world, if, that is, we take it there.

Rather than a warm embrace of the given architecture, as in the MoMA atrium, my understanding of what is planned and mapped out for the galleries of Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen – and later for Kiasma in Helsinki – is that the installation will largely cancel the established architectural space to make way for an architecture of the head, heart, organs and orifices. You, the viewer, are the plasma – the activating agent and elixir – that will flow through an organism that should feel very much like home and as domestic as your own skin. Rist enjoys challenging an institution's space, exhibition budgets and the limits of what is possible for a given installation. She has found, in *Sjarel Ex*, a willing conspirator and genuine collaborator. Plans are fixed on paper. Yet much of what actually takes shape as the exhibition is fluid and will have to be negotiated as it is made in the spaces of the gallery. Come on in – it is a journey as visceral as it is visual. There are nine regions or areas that correspond loosely to organs in atmospheric flow. Ideally these will function as a totality where permeable membranes allow sound and image to meld in the perceptions of a viewer. The ambition is nothing short of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* we each are.

We enter through *Kleines Vorstadthirn von Rotterdam* (Small Suburb Brain of Rotterdam) (1999/2009) – a somewhat sad melancholic text in a horizontal projection. The only sound is a woman speaking as a passenger from the rear seat of a car. Translucent fog lines, membranes of yellow and red, line our interior journey as she rails against all the 'overblown romanticism' that binds us together as pairs – an ideal nuclear constellation for economic desire. The piece stands in direct contrast to the four projections of *Homo Sapiens Sapiens* (2005) that rise above our heads as we lay down next to each other, like *Liliputians* connected by a worm-like blood vessel that snakes its way across the plush green carpet of the liver-like organ. *Homo* is a wish for an Eden without the fall of man. Such a narrative can be signalled through texture, rhythm and rhyme. These works engage in this type of poetics. *Pepperminta*, when it comes, will be Rist's novel disclosure. *À la belle étoile* (2007) finds us under stars but immersed in the physicality of a projected image beneath our feet. Our passage narrows and we squeeze through to a central cavity. *Lungenflügel* (2009) is a new work that also comes from the family of film stock made during the shooting of *Pepperminta*. We are free radicals, chaotic forms and blood cells carrying oxygen to the lungs of the organism. Below, beyond *Apple Tree Innocent on Diamond Hill* (2003), is the stomach and intestines both large and small where everything gets churned up and processed to whatever degree is possible. *Gravity Be My Friend* (2007) explores the universally human, encompassing both genders in projections wet and dry, or relating to air and water on the 'amorphous screens' that provide their own means of egress. *A Liberty Statue for Löndön* (2005/2009) finds its locus in the head and comes forward as a sisterly counterpoint to *Homo Sapiens Sapiens* with its natural state, free of civilization. It is now 40,000 years later than the action of the earlier work. She returns home dressed to go out. For reasons that are unclear to

her, our culture and society has broken down. There is no worry. We can plan an elegant farewell and find new principles. She continues home to marry a man, a foreigner, and... red, red, red. We move underground in a merger of wild nature, civilization and bodily relations. Herz aufwühlen Herz ausspülen (2004) is an amalgam of fairy-tale and instrumental medical images handled in a cinematographic way. There is a call and response signalled in the overlapping projections and the way one material is folded into and anoints the next. Gina's Mobile (2007) might be related to as a region housing all the soft, vascular, culturally prohibited and evolutionarily underdeveloped openings, organs and mucus membranes. It is all skin and closer even than home.

Every cultural expression, be it a literary text, music, film, what have you, is an attempt to understand what is already close yet still elusive. This essay can be nothing other. Stay metal Pipilotti! May we each be altogether human in body, mind and the poetry of our relations with the other and ourselves.