



Hit me with a flower: The enveloping spirit of Pipilotti Rist

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THE WORLD ACCORDING TO PIPILOTTI RIST is either sublime or scary, depending on how you look at it. It's terrifying mostly because it reminds us that we have become detached from our biological bodies precisely because of the forms of digital media that she employs to bring us closer to the throbbing fabric of life. Splendid because she brings us back to the universe as a garden of earthly delights, portraying it in heightened colours and stylised visions the way an excited mind does. The Swiss artist's immersive multimedia installations evoke our bodies as if they were vessels hurtling toward death, all the more ecstatic for their fragility and temporality.

The first time I saw 'Pippi' was through a tiny hole in the wooden floor of New York's PS1, in the 1994 video *Selfless in the bath of lava*, where the naked artist, swimming in boiling magma, looks up and implores: 'I am a worm and you, you are a flower. You would have done everything better. Help me. Forgive me.' I will never forget that moment of discovery: delightful and humorous, touching and disturbing all at once. It knocked me over. 'I really fight against the fact that they want to make us feel we are full of sin when we are born', Rist tells me on the occasion of her recent Trussardi Foundation exhibition, 'Parasimpatico'. 'And then they want to control us the rest of our lives.'

The 1997 double video installation *Ever is over all* expressed the essence of Rist's cathartic impulse to rebel against the constraints of our modern lives. In it filmmaker Silvana Ceschi, dressed in a fluid blue dress and shiny red shoes, walks down the sidewalk in slow motion toting a gigantic flower, which unexpectedly turns into a weapon as she suddenly destroys a car window without changing her blissful expression. 'I *hate* cars', Rist explains. 'For me it was the car as a symbol: it just takes over the world and is unquestioned. It's a golden cow.'

Since *Ever is over all*, which won a Venice Biennale

prize, Rist has continued to bust open taboos and provoke hedonistic urges, attempting to loosen the ties of our formidable inhibitions. Some new underwear chandeliers comprise a dizzying array of incandescent white panties strung up as if hung out to dry, a slickly sweet double entendre on letting it all hang out. Here Rist sees the crotch – our entryway into the universe, the focus of lovemaking and sexual pleasure, and the exit for waste – as sacred and underpants as its temple. The *Massachusetts chandelier*, 2010, greeted visitors at the Hayward Gallery's recent exhibition 'Eyeball Massage', while *Cape Cod chandelier*, 2011, illuminated the lobby of Milan's Cinema Manzoni, site of the 2011 Trussardi show.

For 'Parasimpatico', the 1950s movie palace was transformed into an erotic carnival, introduced halfway up the red-carpeted stairs by *Nothing*, 2011, a machine blowing giant bubbles past the voids of empty illuminated billboards. Further along was the hallucinogenic *Lobe of the lung*, 2009, starring Rist's red-haired alter ego Ewelina Guzik, who frolicked in a red-and-green flowerbed that dripped down the undulating ceiling. In the main theatre a projection of *Homo sapiens sapiens* – the film that was shut down by the Vatican during its 2005 Venice Biennale run in the church of San Stae – animated a frescoed cupola. The chariot-borne women in the historical painting were transformed by lurid blood-red streaks, invoking menstrual allusions; a hand gently fondling a pair of testicles segued into two hands violently crushing oranges. Viewers' craning necks were supported by stuffed headless torsos, designed by Rist and her sister, Tamara, while disembodied appendages – a breast and an ear, a pretty smiling mouth, a flaccid penis – floated comically around the auditorium's perimeter.

One of the most compelling aspects of the artist's work is the way she uses herself as a subject to draw the viewer in through a sense of intimacy. In her very first video, *I'm not the*

Gravity be my friend, 2007, audio video installation, installation view, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 2011. Photograph Andrew Curtis. Courtesy the artist, Hauser & Wirth, and Luhring Augustine, New York.

girl who misses much, 1986, Rist appears in a black dress with her breasts bared, awkwardly dancing while singing the first line of the Beatles song 'Happiness Is a Warm Gun' until she becomes completely blue and fuzzy. As curator Massimiliano Gioni says: 'She likes to go home and put the video camera on herself because it is warm.' Projected onto the giant screen in the Cinema Manzoni, *Open my glade (flatten)*, 2000, featured Rist pressing her face against the lens in an attempt to break through it towards the audience. Gradually her enormous visage becomes more distorted and desperate and, with her makeup smudged, she starts to lick the screen.

By breaking down the corporeal boundary of the screen, merging it with space and thus our bodies, Rist hopes to make us one giant orgasm – as Guzik proclaimed in the artist's 2009 film, *Pepperminta* – flowing with the natural universe. From the perspective of extreme close-up we see details too sharply while the big picture remains fuzzy, kind of like a giant caress. Body parts are often confounded with fruits and flowers, exploding in dazzling colours; disorienting motions undermine our terrestrial bearings, carrying us away into a psychedelic womb. 'People come to a museum and *bring* their body – a big contrast to TV, which comes into your private home – so why always make them fight against gravity?' Rist asks. The title of her 2008 exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art, 'Pour Your Body Out (7354 Cubic Meters)', evokes the desired effect of the Swiss artist's recent celluloid experiences to transform spaces into living organisms: the room was filled with high-definition video projections, hypnotic music and furniture designed to encourage visitors to recline and melt into their surroundings.

Rist often adds sculptural elements to create living-room environments and enhance the ambient experience. For 'I Packed the Postcard in My Suitcase', the artist's recent show at Melbourne's Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA),

she built a carpeted topographical landscape from which the recumbent audience can watch the morphing spectacle. In other rooms, solid colours or scenes are painted on the wall as backgrounds for projected images. 'I hope they go home then and put their flat screens onto the ceilings – because it takes away so much space, you know, in the living rooms', she says. 'I'm sure in one hundred years it will be standard.'

Rist uses the exhibition space as a material, adapting her work equally to both white cubes and rooms fraught with historic or stylistic character. For the drab concrete box of the Hayward Gallery – as well as for ACCA – she employed a series of scrims that layer, repeat and merge the images. 'You walk in between and the picture becomes bigger and bigger, extremely physical like layers in the brain, blinding you a little bit', Rist explains. As each work mingles with the next, becoming a sort of ambient background for the others, our freely associating brains project meaning onto them just as certain spaces imbue the images with a particular flavour. Indeed, these environments – created out of light, intense colour and sound – mimic how the brain reflects reality.

Perhaps in Rist's hands the museum is really a hospital for the mind and spirit. 'That's what I would wish', she says. 'I'd like you to walk out smiling, feeling lighter.' It's all about discovering our own unexplored potential and the adventure that is our splendid body. 'The brain is absolutely scary', Rist emphasises. 'We are never the same; every day we are somebody a bit different. And what you actually see is always what you think of.'

Parasimpatico, Trussardi Foundation, Cinema Manzoni, Milan, 9 November – 18 December 2011; **I Packed the Postcard in My Suitcase**, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 21 December 2011 – 4 March 2012.