Psychedelic, Baby: An Interview with Pipilotti Rist

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Pipilotti Rist is the kind of artist you can get a big crush on. Her work wills you into its charm, and so does she. Self-possessed, stylish, and smart, she seems at one with the lush and enchanting worlds she creates in her media extravaganzas. And like her work, Rist defies easy apprehension. As such, my interview with her could be thought to be doomed from the beginning, and in the conventional sense I suppose it was. Arriving at Luhring Augustine Gallery in New York on a brutally cold Sunday morning in April (it was snowing), her last day in town, I found her preoccupied with getting her installations up and going for a crowd of Guggenheim collectors to whom she was to give a walk-through later that day. Our conversation began with coffee and some idle chatting. But soon a kind of friendly struggle ensued. Questions were met with questions, their meanings continuously negotiated, and in the end, there were few revelations. Nonetheless, the evolution of our dialogue, with its frequent stops and starts, and awkward lurches, provided insights of its own.

As the first part of the interview shows, my projections onto Rist’s work were difficult to substantiate. She doesn’t like these initial passages even now. Moreover, in spite of her precise, incisive demeanor, Rist often acted the role of shape-shifter, circling back on an idea or thought to re-invent it anew—just when I thought I had a foothold. These were not the inconsistent wavering of an unsure artist, mind you. Rist is above all very clear about what she is doing, and, as is often the case, equally so about what she is not doing. Her thoughts were honest, admirably articulate (especially considering the interpreter didn’t show up that day), and evocative of a sharp mind.

Still, I wondered what I had learned from this interview as I went to meet my boyfriend for brunch afterwards. I’d failed to get the goods. How an artist thinks, responds, and articulates can reveal a lot about what they do, Bradley told me. Or not, I thought. As a test, I went back to Rist’s solo exhibition at the gallery (her first in New York), expecting to view it with greater acuity, or perhaps different eyes. But nothing had changed in the way her dreamy mindscapes made me feel. Instead, I was smitten all over again. Standing in her darkened room with its projected starscape full of blinking eyes and truncated feet that turned like celestial planets, I was ready to fly high into her starry skies and fancy my own dreams. How is it that what we might gain from an artist’s work can appear at odds with what they intend or who they are as individuals? Recently, a friend of mine told me that he wept before a Lucian Freud portrait of a woman who, he felt, cursed him with her despair. Her essence, he said, had truly been captured. Did I believe in that, he asked? That such a thing could be contained in a painting? No, I quickly replied, it is all in the eye of the beholder. And so it seems it is.

Harris: The sexuality in your works, and the sense of pleasure you express in your body is really positive, and often girlish. One of your Rist-isms states, “It takes a load of skill to make up for every iota of innocence that we lose.” Can you comment on this theme?
Pipilotti Rist. Himalaya
Rist: I don't quite understand what you mean by "girlish." I know the word, but I do not understand why you would say "girlish." Because there are girls in my work, or because you think the women who are performing behave like girls? What is "girlish"?

Harris: Well, for me being "girlish" isn't limited to girls, it's just a sense of associating with a kind of pre-adolescence—a time in a female's life that is often rife with sexual experiences and an exploration of the body, but without the kind of shame that generally comes with the onset of adolescence. For me, it was a time when I had an empowering degree of independence and self-worth, a secret life of games and friends, when I felt safe out in the world.

Rist: That's true. That's something very childish to play around with your own body without needing another. You're happy being with your own body...

Harris: And living in it without self-consciousness, and in your work I experience a sense of bringing back that feeling without problematizing it, i.e., via any overtly feminist agenda.

Rist: I'm for sure a feminist. But if I show a woman who deals with her own body and is playful and proud—not women who behave as they should, but as you said like children—there is the risk of a negative interpretation. I think we have to be careful when we see or represent a woman who does not behave as society expects her to so that we don't infantilize her. I think it's dangerous to say that my figures are childish. It's true, I like to give them a healthy, playful sensibility in relation to their body, but then to say that this person is like a child—I think it's a trap.

Harris: It's interesting that you say that. For me, being "girlish" does not negate being womanish at the same time. Girls can be womanish, or try to, so why can't it go both ways? It's just a continuum of self-expression in my opinion. Why should we abandon or repress our girl selves when they are as much a part of who we are as our adult selves?

Rist: But to say "girlish" for me means you don't have to take these people seriously. If somebody, for example, acts really silly or flips out, you say she acts like a child or a crazy person. And if we then sit down with this woman to have a discussion, we don't have to take her seriously anymore.

Harris: True, I suppose, but I'm not comfortable behaving, as you say, according to "the rules." Strangely, what I responded to in your work was what I perceived to be a breakdown of those kinds of categories.

Rist: Yes, I do try to do that in my work. I try to do it in myself, even if I don't often feel successful. It's good to behave with as little fear as possible, because we have so many fears and restrictions. It would be great if nobody treated us badly because we could be more spontaneous or, as you say, more childish.

Harris: Yes, I think it's important to resist these pejorative associations. There's a link for me between this playfulness I speak of and this wonderful quality of enchantment in your work, neither of which, from my perspective, conflicts with its obvious intellect. In fact, one of my favorite things about
Pipilotti Rist. Himalaya
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Seven projections sur-
rounded by furniture and
objects, wallpaper mount-
ed on wood, seven players,
one audio system with
four speakers (sound with
Anders Guggisberg).
Courtesy of Luhring
Augustine, New York.
your videos is how they achieve this balance between virtuosity and spontaneity. You're the editor, producer, director, and often actor; yet you create works that don't draw too much attention to the complexity of their craft.

Rist: A lot of people think that I work with more complicated machines than I do, when in fact I work in a very low-tech way that is much more interesting. For example, in the footage of the flying body parts, the hands and feet, people think this is computer animated. It's not true. I did it in my apartment near a window. I put black fabric over things, and wore black clothes (except for those areas of my body), and I lay down and moved my limbs around with the camera twisting in my hand. So it was just sunlight, black fabric, and a consumer camera. I didn't even use a studio light. Then on the computer, of course, I had to correct for different tones of blacks. I also work with surveillance cameras, the small ones. In the projected images here behind the orange sofa, for example, of a woman's reflection on a house, the camera sweeps across the outside of the house. It looks as if I had used a hundred thousand dollar machine. But it's just a long aluminum stick with a "thumb" attached to it, one of those microphones. With that I can get extremely dynamic movements if I work with a wide angle, but again it's very low tech. That's the production side. The other side is the installation. For me, it's very important that things looks simple. But the simpler it looks, the more work it is, like figuring out how to hang the projectors. There is also for me the issue that I am a woman. Of course, I have double the pressure to be technically good. Before, when you were waiting to talk to me, we didn't have electricity. These museum people are coming later today, and I wouldn't want them to see these technical problems. As a woman, I don't dare allow that.

Harris: Well, if something's not working, that's the fault of the venue.

Rist: Yes, but I don't like the picture of having a dependent woman there, and she's dependent on some stupid guys or institutions. Why didn't she check that two hours before to be sure? So there I'm a little bit . . .

Harris: Compulsive.

Rist: Yes. There's also the problem of knowing when to stop. Sometimes it's easier to concentrate on technical problems, and then you don't have to deal with psychological ones. For example, it's heavy for me to have a solo exhibition for the first time in New York. It's very tough here. So it's easier to concentrate on . . .

Harris: The technical parts, which provides an interesting segue to another question, or, maybe I should say, theory of mine. The way you accelerate and decelerate the speed of your film and audio, creating these sudden visual and aural disruptions, seems to allegorize emotional states. You know, like in your early work I'm Not The Girl Who Misses Much (1986), you're singing in this crooning voice, and your body is swiveling around gracefully, and then everything speeds up. Suddenly your voice is this high-pitched shriek, and your body is manically jerking and twitching. Watching a lot of your videos, action seems to exist between these poles of mania and exhaustion, so much so they end up having a cathartic effect on the viewer.
Rist: What is “cathartic”?

Harris: Cathartic is a kind of relief or purging, like at the end of an orgasm. That kind of release. Are they cathartic for you? There is a certain consistency, a rhythm in the way you employ these kinds of disruptions, and at the same time if you look individually at specific pieces, they are very much linked to the content of the work and what’s going on.

Rist: That’s the ideal case, that all the effects are linked with the content. In I’m Not The Girl Who Misses Much, the whole speeding up, and use of different speeds is for me an exorcistic dance. When I present things in slow motion, I would say that’s “reality,” because our perception of time is subjective. When you’re nervous, a half hour can feel like an eternity, and when you’re feeling contemplative, it goes so fast. So time is extremely relative. And I work with that. For example, slow motion and circles in my work have very much to do with paying honor to something, paying tribute or glorifying them.

Harris: I was interested in how these alterations in pacing function both to convey the particular content of different pieces, and also as a more generalized form. Are they part of a certain style that’s going to be associated with you?

Rist: I’m not doing corporate identity. Of course, there is my character in it, and I have some rules. For example, one rule is that I will never show something that isn’t really thought out. My work is very concentrated imagery put into a concentrated loop. I don’t show garbage footage. That’s another style. The images in the final work you see are carefully culled from hours and hours of footage. I don’t want to give the feeling that the choices of imagery are accidental, or casual—that this picture could just as well be another picture. I don’t like that. I try to be precise. I prefer to use less material and slow it down than to present more in real time. But this is not a corporate identity. This is more a respect for the spectator—because they give me a certain time from their life, and I don’t want to spoil it. There are many different reasons for using different speeds. Sometimes I slow things down to relax the person who is watching it. Or, for example, in this space where the body parts are flying around, speed works to create a wistful kind of journey. I may have seen the picture a thousand times, and have a particular sensation I associate with it, but if one sees it for the first time it will be a different experience. I try to present it as I would like to see it.

Harris: So in a way are you trying to replicate your own personal experience with the images, to re-create that initial encounter for the viewer?

Rist: Yes. If you look at a book, for example, maybe it looks very interesting if you look at the book very quickly, and if we go there a little bit deeper, it’s not so interesting anymore, but then if you go even deeper, it becomes interesting again. I have to deal with things like this. As I said, speed is so relative. It’s a question of concentration.

Harris: It also makes it interesting for you again in a way, too.

Rist: Yes.
Pipilotti Rist. Himalaya
Seven projections surrounded by furniture and objects, wallpaper mounted on wood, seven players, one audio system with four speakers (sound with Anders Guggisberg).
Courtesy of Luhring Augustine, New York.
Harris: As a follow-up to this question of rhythm in your work, I was thinking about the falling down sequences in Pipilotti’s Mistake (Absolutions) (1988), and other works, which for me are curiously enlivening.

Rist: Yes. I also see it that way. It’s not dying. It’s more like being born. The use of falling represents different things. One is my absolute respect for how much people can stand: so much pain and yet always we get up, fall down and get up again. I am fascinated by this. It is also a comfort to know whenever you get down there will be a way to come up. And the other thing is to show how much we are like puppets—that often we are not really in control of our lives.

Harris: In what sense? Because I wondered, and I know this is very literal, if it also functioned as a metaphor for falling in love?

Rist: No. We don’t have that expression in German. We say verlieben. Liebe is love, but the word comes from leiben, and leiben means “to embody.” So “love” in German is linked with body. “I body you” is “I love you.” Like a mother-child or lover-lover. That’s loving. Falling in love is an English expression. There’s actually a very nice work of Barbara Kruger—a portrait of a woman with wet hair with the phrase, “Love is something you fall into.” It’s very Kruger. I love Barbara Kruger. But I didn’t have this in mind.

Harris: Well, maybe it’s the melancholic aspect of some of your works, which often mitigates its playfulness, that evokes for me the ups and downs of a relationship. Maybe, like a lot of people, I assume that because you’re in your work so much, it must have some autobiographical content.

Rist: I start from very personal experiences, but then during the process my works gain broader social meanings. In Pipilotti’s Mistake, I tried to make a work about the shortcomings of my character. And it’s a very poetic rather than documentary work. So it’s a mixture. It’s as if you would read a poem by Anne Sexton. For me it’s like . . .

Harris: . . . embedding the personal in something more universal. I just wonder if at times you are trying to present the subjective, or internal, experience of living in a sensual body in contrast, or in relation to, the specular body. For example, the retinal images you show in Stop My Ocean (1996). Is there a desire to underscore the difference between how people view Pipi and how Pipi experiences herself?

Rist: Of course there’s a contradiction at work. Maybe this is going to sound . . . well, I don’t care how it sounds. What I’ve found is the more famous I’ve become, the more success I’ve had, the less people seem really interested in me as a person. If they talk to me, they always talk to somebody else. I have almost no chance to be myself anymore. Or to be a person.

Harris: That’s sad.

Rist: It is. I just have to eat it and say okay it’s like this, but it’s not true that if you have attention as an artist, that you can bring your personal things and people will be interested. They are not interested in you.
**Harris:** But with celebrity culture, which unfortunately the art world sometimes mirrors, people tend to get more obsessed with a "star's" personal life, and start to read their work in these terms.

**Rist:** They start to read the work as a description of my personality. When I talk with them, I'm not there anymore. They don't need me. When they start to talk to me, they have a picture. They want me to be like this, and I hardly can break that.

**Harris:** What do you think the picture is?

**Rist:** I'm somebody that does only what she wants [laughs].

**Harris:** Is that bad?

**Rist:** No, but that's ridiculous, because life is for everybody, and also for me, a big balance between what you want and what's possible. And it's full of logistics, administration, and transportation. Very practical things. There is this idea of the artist as somebody who is free, who can get up at 12 o'clock and work one hour until 1 o'clock, and then get drunk at 2 o'clock. I would also like to ask you what you thought I am or should be? Or what kind of a person I am?

**Harris:** You want to really know what I thought? Well, see this is very revealing of me, which is only fair, since you're sharing your feelings with me. When I saw you lecture at the Public Art Fund, I was impressed with your decision to fill the allotted two hours with a continuous screening of your works. You showed so much, and I thought it was really generous. And also you talked about the work technically. I think for me just sitting and seeing this progression of your work, the variation, I became enamored with it. And I didn't expect to, I guess. I had been interested in it prior to that, but it had been so contextualized as pop culture, with all the music video connotations, I hadn't realized how much more there was to it.

**Rist:** Often my work is treated more like fashion. Maybe it's my name, my first name. It's also a political and social question. Fifty years ago, the spoken word reigned, but during the last fifty years, the power has gone over to pictures. Everybody is now well educated visually, and yet there is still this Klassenkampf, this class fight between the word people and the picture people.

**Harris:** Which brings me to characterizations of your work. Nancy Spector described your work as being simultaneously coquetteish and rebellious. She referred specifically to I'm Not the Girl Who Misses Much—this work that put you on the map—as a satire on the commodified eroticism of MTV.

**Rist:** It's actually the best work I ever made [laughs]. Where did she say that? In Parkett?

**Harris:** Yes. Why I bring it up is that I think a lot of people share this interpretation.

**Rist:** Okay, when I made this piece, I had never seen MTV [laughs]. And I hate cynicism.
Harris: In his review in the Village Voice of the Hugo Boss show at the Guggenheim, Peter Schejdatl complimented the restraint he saw in Sip My Ocean. He wrote, "The verge of tears is common spiritual territory for the best art. Tears themselves are a standard destination of trash."

Rist: I'm very interested in melancholy and conveying desire or longing. Extremely interested. But I always want to have some hope. I could never show a sad thing without exit, without hope, or a possible solution to overcome or resolve it.

Harris: Why do you think that is?

Rist: That’s just me [laughs]. A work should never be only negative, where it sucks your energy and then just leaves you alone. It should comfort you in the sadness, let you know you are not the only sad person in your world.

Harris: Misery loves company. So, what kind of music are you listening to you these days?

Rist: Sad music [laughs]. I always choose boyfriends with a very good music collection. So my boyfriend has a very good collection. I think boyfriends are there to offer a good collection that the girlfriend can borrow from. I like electronica, techno, easy listening, and drum and bass. I like the music of the last years, but I also really like sixties stuff. And of course, I'm a huge fan of the graphic design of the sixties and the fashion.

Harris: There are a lot of aspects to your work—saturated color fields, mutating forms, kaleidoscopic imagery, and ambient sound tracks—that conjure associations with psychedelia.

Rist: But I would say the world is psychedelic. And I think that the world is even more colorful than I have ever been. After the sixties, we have tried to ignore that. Look at this object. It’s totally red. We have this yellow daylight, which creates this intensity. But if I were to photograph it, the red wouldn’t seem as intense. So I would have to push it up to bring it back to reality.

Harris: So again you're talking about re-creating that primary, sensorial relationship to imagery.

Rist: Yes.

Jane Harris is a writer living in Brooklyn. Her writings have appeared in art & text, Art in America, Bookforum, The Drama Review, New Art Examiner, and Sculpture, among others.