

Rist: It was through my interest in mass media that I became involved in art. I will always be grateful to popular culture. I've never had a snobbish attitude towards pop music or the applied arts. I've always had a great deal of respect for my colleagues who are doing great things in these different contexts.¹

With typical forthrightness, Rist claims, I don't see why (art) shouldn't be commercial. It's absurd. Even if the art world keeps denying it, the art market exists and functions according to the same laws as any other business.' Rist is one of the few women in the art world blunt enough to admit that her art is a business.²

Rist: I opted for video because I can perform all the steps myself, from the camera work to online editing, and that suits me. I can work all by myself or in a small team.³

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.⁴

Rist: I often say the video is like a painting on glass that moves, because video has a rough, imperfect quality that looks like painting. I do not want to copy reality in my work; 'reality' is always much sharper and more contrasted than anything that can ever be created with video. Video has its own particular qualities, its own lousy, nervous, inner world quality, and I work with that.⁵

For Rist, art's power stems primarily from its access to the unconsciousness. Her best work has the quality of a dream.⁶

I'm Not the Girl Who Misses Much (1986)

The protagonist – who in Rist's videos is often the artist herself – dances and sings the (slightly modified) refrain from John Lennon's song, Happiness is a warm gun. The bodily movements supply the rhythm for the singing, and at the same time the song is a parody of the dance. Image, sound, and movement are tipped off-balance to generate a psychotic greenhouse effect. The dance builds into an hysterical wriggle as the picture rolls faster and faster, and it freezes into slow-motion as the picture speed drops. The performer has become dependent on technology; she has turned into a reflection of her medium. Her displayed female attributes – bright red lipstick and bare breasts – detach themselves from her grotesquely distorted body and flutter, ghostlike, across the screen. The sound, which speeds up and slows down in sync with the picture, underscores the process of self-dissolution. The voice skids into shrill incomprehensibility. What began as a jaunty pop video ends up as a pictorial mess with sound effects. : This formulaic,

¹ Obrist, pg 16

² Phelan, pg 40

³ Obrist, pg 10

⁴ Ziegler, pg 80

⁵ Obrist, pg 12

⁶ Phelan, pg 65-6

repetitive refrain (*I'm Not the Girl Who Misses Much*) turns into a monotone cry for help, forcing the viewer out of the role of a passive consumer.⁷

The camera does not function here as a passive recording eye, imitating our role as couch-bound television voyeur. Rather, it actively disrupts and confuses the viewing experience through intentional technological glitches, seemingly capricious jump-cuts, and erratic tonal shifts. What begins as a playful, even coquettish satire on the commodified eroticism of television's music videos and their barely concealed sexism turns into a more defiant statement of female empowerment. ... Ever alert and always observing the interpersonal dynamics of daily life, she stakes out an aesthetic territory in which women are in control of their own (self-)imagery, maybe even their own fates. Hysterical antics and manic behavior are inescapable parts of Rist's narratives. In fact, mutability is embraced as a necessary component of the liberatory attitude infusing her entire production.⁸

Rist: There is a long history of films inspired by music and other experimental filmmaking that predates MTV. People saw my first video, *I'm Not the Girl Who Misses Much*, as a critical reflection of MTV, but I hadn't even seen MTV at that point. That work was a reflection of contemporary pop culture in general.⁹

Rist on Paik:

Rist: (Nam June) Paik's work and mine have in common that we both try to draw the viewer inside it. At first you look at the box, at the screen or projection, but when you concentrate on the sequences you feel as if you're inside the box, behind the glass, within the wall. You forget everything around you and concentrate completely on the box: you're swallowed. This can be achieved in many different ways, for example, through the number of monitors or the size of the display, through the installation and its choreography. Paik managed to rid himself of this suspicious box in many different ways: he'd transform the TV monitor into a lamp or place it inside an aquarium. Reconquering the space inside the TV set: that's one of my aims as well.¹⁰

Yoghurt on Skin – Velvet on TV (1994) and Digesting Impressions (1993)

Rist tried to complicate the viewing experience by eliminating the large square box of the monitor as the primary frame for viewing. In *Yoghurt on Skin – Velvet on TV*, she placed tiny monitors inside handbags and seashells and placed them on pedestals. If one opened a purse or peered into a seashell, one might see a video of a brightly colored sea scene, or a garish toe spotted with red blood. Inverting the prohibition against touching the object common to most museums and galleries, *Yoghurt* also brought a haptic dimension to Rist's work, which had been primarily visual and aural before. In *Digesting Impressions*, Rist placed a circular monitor inside a woman's yellow bathing suit and suspended it from the ceiling. A kind of bobbing buoy, the slightly transparent swimsuit served as both skin that veiled and skin that beckoned the eye. Looking closely,

⁷ Babias, pg 104

⁸ Spector, pg 75 (Hugo Boss)

⁹ Obrist, pg 12

¹⁰ Obrist, pg 15

one could glimpse an endoscopic camera's progress through human intestines, suggesting perhaps a limit to the appeal of an ever closer look.¹¹

In both of these works, Rist evokes usually private feminine domains and pries them open – an invasion that confronts us with our own voyeuristic impulses.¹²

Rist was attempting to combine video with installation, looking for a way to interfere with the architectural and spatial orientation of the fixed screen emanating from the square box of the monitor. But the installations also risked overwhelming the video images; the viewer was sometimes more entranced by picking up the seashell or opening the purse than by looking at the video.¹³

Sip My Ocean (1996)

In 1996, with *Sip My Ocean*, Rist solved her problem by enlarging her screen, eliminating the monitor and working more intimately with the architecture of the exhibition space itself. Rist claims, 'When you project an image, the wall dissolves and the image becomes the architecture.'¹⁴

Taped almost entirely underwater, Rist's mesmerizing, dual-screen *Sip My Ocean* offers a sybaritic "fish-eye" view of swaying seaweed gardens and coral kingdoms. A bikini-clad woman is seen intermittently cavorting in the waves; her obvious pleasure and sense of self-containment is transmitted to the viewer as part of a kaleidoscopic, cinematic narrative about longing, desire, and dreams of fulfillment. The video is projected in duplicate as mirrored reflections on two adjoining walls, with the corner between them an immobile seam around which psychedelic configurations radiate and swirl. Choreographed to a soundtrack of the artist alternately crooning and hysterically shrieking Chris Issak's love song "Wicked Games" *Sip My Ocean* disturbs as much as it seduces, leaving one to wonder if there might be trouble in this aquatic paradise. Desire, after all, always demands an "other," one who may or may not yield to the embrace.¹⁵

Sip My Ocean is Rist's invitation to participate in this game of desire and fulfillment; yet it is also a dare to survive its perilous undertow.¹⁶

Ever is Over All (1997)

Composed of two lush, colorful projections on abutting walls, the video portrays a spirited story of feminine rebelliousness. A young woman wearing a Cinderella-blue, taffeta dress is seen tilting down an urban street swinging a large, plume like flower. The floral motif is echoed in the adjacent projection, in which the camera pans across and through fields of wild flowers, caressing petals and pistils along the way. The woman's sauntering gait is keyed to a lyrical soundtrack composed by Rist, whose own six-year stint with the all-girl rock band titled (The Next Queens) has greatly inspired the distinctive presence of music in her videos. With each swing of her magic flower, our protagonist strikes a car parked along the sidewalk and, much to her amusement and delight, shatters its window. A policeman seen approaching from afar will surely

¹¹ Phelan, pg 56-7

¹² Janus, pg 101

¹³ Phelan, pg 56-7

¹⁴ Phelan, pg 56

¹⁵ Spector, pg 76 (Hugo Boss)

¹⁶ Spector, pg 85 (Parkett)

apprehend such a menace to public property. But once the two are face to face, the policeman, who turns out to be female, merely tips her hat in solidarity and approval.¹⁷

Many read the video as a kind of feminist revenge fantasy. The phallic flower is wielded by a woman in a conservative dress; her counterpart, the woman police officer wearing the state and representing 'the law of the father' applauds the power of phallic woman. Unlike other feminist 'revenge' texts, however, *Ever is Over All* is matter-of-fact, hypnotically beautiful in its slow motion effects and fade to flowers. The video is clearly a feminist work, but that is not the most interesting thing about it. Insufficient attention is paid to the diptych in critical commentary on the work; most read only the narrative plot. But the narrative works in the space between the two video projections as well. In that blank but fecund space, the associative links between nature, women, violence and beauty are all rearranged. ... Rist proposes a more startling way of linking these terms. ... The daring exuberance of thinking outside the law, imagining a different relationship to property, to movement, to the criminal power of beauty itself, is the video's truest achievement.¹⁸

Rist states, Art's task is to contribute to evolution, to encourage the mind, to guarantee a detached view of social changes, to conjure up positive energies, to create sensuousness, to reconcile reason and instinct, to research possibilities, to destroy clichés and prejudices. Most people don't see it that way.¹⁹

Open My Glade (2000)

Rist: I see Times Square as an overwhelming space full of electric blossoms and electronic twinkle that hit visitors like a slap in the face. I use the energy of this 'slap' to fuel my video segments. The video was broadcast for 60 seconds every hour, sixteen times each day. Viewers saw a woman flattening her face against the screen as if she wanted to break out and come down into the Square. The flattened face looks very deformed and needy. You want to set her free, and with her all the ghosts surrounding the screens. ... The screens on Times Square blink and flash and have their own uncoordinated rhythm. The only genuinely 'different' image would be on in which the viewer can see and feel that there is no commercial intention behind it: this would truly be a shock. I don't pretend you can really knock TV out of its habitual hectic rhythm or provoke much reflection among viewers, even if this, of course, is what most artists would like to provoke – a distanced reflection of society.²⁰

Her 'advertisements for feelings' projected in Times Square often seemed to be ads for not having too many. Rist's video astutely point to the acquisitive structure of the media screen: from ads to news, public screen projections participate in an economy of having, possessing, knowing and owning. Her more enigmatic projections suggest that emotions are not things that circulate and gain value only when they are given to others. This economy upsets the system of capital, that holds us ever more captive. ... Rist's project exposed all to well the violent limit of capitalism's sharply edged screen.²¹

¹⁷ Spector, pg 75-6 (Hugo Boss)

¹⁸ Phelan, pg 62

¹⁹ Obrist, pg 10

²⁰ Obrist, pg 23

²¹ Phelan, pg 41

Rist has been devoted to exploring how to extend and enlarge spatial limits. Her work makes room for interior images, emotions, dreams and all that is usually edited out of external images on the stage of postmodern art. Video is the centre of these investigations. Concentrating primarily on the ways in which the language and rhythm of video alters, surmounts, enriches and displaces our relationship to physical space and, therefore, to material reality, Rist's work to date offers an unusual opportunity to assess more richly what it means to live 'inside the box' of the ubiquitous external image.²²

²² Phelan, pg 34

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