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The World's Most Colorf

By Randy Kennedy
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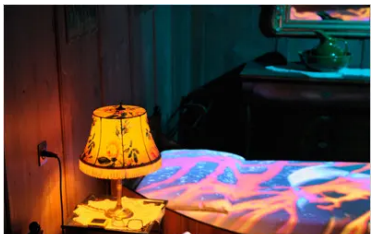
In a dark, silo-shaped room in the upscale Jardim Europa neighborhood of São Paulo, Brazil, last month, an impassioned aesthetic debate was underway, though it would have been tough for anyone walking into the room to tell. I was at a place called the Museum of Image and Sound, lying on my back with seven other people, all of us completely silent in brightly colored hammocks that had been hung around a circular scaffolding. Our feet angled together toward the center of the room and our heads radiated out like lotus petals. We were all staring up at the ceiling, where two video works were being projected, both featuring a pale, red-headed woman who looked like a Nereid sprung to life. In the first video, she navigates her way through a candy-colored world — a birch forest; a long airportlike corridor; a leaf-strewn sidewalk that the camera scuttles along low and fast, as if from the vantage point of a bug.

In the second video, pieces of which would have been instantly familiar to anyone who visited the atrium of the Museum of Modern Art in New York last winter, the same woman crawls naked through the grass, and super-zoomed-in images of her apple-stuffed mouth alternate with that of a fairly nasty-looking black pig's. The sequence ends as the woman rises from a body of water with menstrual blood dripping from the crotch of her white underwear, turning the water — and thus the whole screen and the room — a deep crimson.

Pipilotti Rist, the Swiss artist from whose overflowing mind and cameras these images came, finally got up and walked around, and so did everyone else on her creative team, a group that functions like a close-knit family, with Rist as the cool but fiercely involved mother. They had been in Brazil for almost two weeks at that point, installing what amounted to a mini-retrospective of Rist's career in two small contemporary art spaces in São Paulo, one of which was this small, scrappy museum housed in a handsome white Modernist building that was once a private house.

The disagreement that morning — one that had been building for days — was whether to leave the circular room with the single video installation originally planned for it, a piece from 2005 called "A Liberty Statue for Löndön"; or to add the second one, a newly conceived work that Rist had been editing at a furious pace from footage she first used in "Pour Your Body Out (7354 Cubic Meters)," her multi-projection installation that became a huge hit last year at MoMA. That work, a video-in-the-round immersion, transformed the museum's ungainly atrium into what one critic described variously as a bordello, a pleasure dome and an opium den, a work that seemed to cause the masculine-feeling museum to (at least metaphorically) ovulate.



Rist in front of the camera in her own "Do Not Abandon Me," an installation at Schloss Werdenberg castle in Switzerland.
Jonathan de Villiers for The New York Times

"Pour Your Body Out" was one of Rist's most ambitious pieces. And for many Americans it was an introduction to her signature methods: bringing the world right up to your nose, radically, uncomfortably close, in a boldly feminist way that upends conventions of beauty and body image, but doing so while inviting you to relax, stretch out, put your feet up and not feel preached to or even particularly confronted.

Rist, who lives and works in Zurich, pursues this goal with a kind of missionary zeal and a stupendous work ethic born of her Swiss Protestant upbringing. After a few fallow years beginning in 2000 when she says she felt burned out as an artist and moved to Los Angeles to teach, she has roared back and, at 47, is an undisputed star, one of the most-sought-after artists of her generation. At the same time that she was mounting the MoMA exhibition, she was completing the editing of her first feature-length film, "Pepperminta," which made its debut in September at the Venice Film Festival and has been received so far with mostly positive, if perplexed, reviews. (Variety predicted that its commercial prospects would be "as flat as a stick of Doublemint gum.") When I first met her a couple of weeks after the debut, she gave me the beginner's summary of the hallucinatory plot, which she conveyed with all the gravity of someone synopsizing "Citizen Kane": "It is about a young woman and her friends on a quest to find the right color combinations and with these colors they can free other people from fear and make life better."

As corny as that might sound, it is more or less what Rist herself has been after for much of her 20-year career and what was driving the debate that morning in São Paulo at the Museum of Image and Sound. Rist felt strongly that she wouldn't be giving Brazil her all if she showed only older work in both her exhibitions. So on a Saturday evening, struck by what she called "my Saturday-night fever," she began to edit a new video, a painfully slow process using only the laptops she had brought with her. Her assistants — including Rachele Giudici, her studio manager; Davide Legittimo, her video specialist; and Markus Huber Recabarren, who helps design her installations — argued that adding the new video was, as a formal matter, pretty ragged and that it was also a disservice to the older work. "It's like saying it's not good enough," Giudici told me.

Rist emerged from the exhibition room with her arms crossed, a pained expression on her face. Nobody seemed to want to say anything. I asked her if she had made up her mind.

"Ja, we keep it," she pronounced. "Maybe it's not so clear, artistically," she added, "but it's O.K. I can be not clear, for São Paulo." Turning to Karin Seinsoth, a project coordinator from her Zurich gallery, Hauser & Wirth, she put a hand on her shoulder and told her: "Don't take it personally. It means a lot to me that you were all against it."

Then Rist strode over to where a man was at work painting the title of the piece on the wall and pointed to a blank space. “We will add it here,” she said. “Now we must find out how in Portuguese you say ‘Bonus track.’ ”

CRITICISM OF RIST’S work, to the degree that there has been much, has usually focused on the concern that it is too colorful and friendly, especially in the realm of video art, whose roots lie mostly in using television-like images as a cudgel to knock people out of the trance largely fostered by television itself. (Take, for example, “Think,” Bruce Nauman’s 1993 wickedly simple work, which consists of images of his head bouncing toward each other like basketballs on two stacked monitors as he shouts “Think!” over and over at the viewer.)

Some people complained that Rist’s work, especially in its early days, was too close to the experimental end of the music-video world, the kind of thing you wouldn’t have been surprised to find in the wee hours back on MTV’s “120 Minutes.” But in many ways this is what Rist, who speaks of her admiration for the work of music-video auteurs like Michel Gondry and Chris Cunningham, was after. She has always viewed art as a kind of bonus track, something that should openly seek to cause joy and that we should be happy to discover, like a gift, on the regular song list of life. In one of her often-repeated observations about video work, she compares it to the capaciousness of women’s handbags — with “room in them for everything: painting, technology, language, music, lousy flowing pictures, poetry, commotion, premonitions of death, sex and friendliness” — a woman’s canny update of Matisse’s already canny statement about wanting his art to be like a comfortable armchair for the tired businessman.

Rist often speaks about her distress that over the last 40 years or so, at least since the rise of Conceptualism, the gulf between the world of contemporary art and the world in general seems to be widening, with art viewed by too many people as some kind of parochial game played among artists, institutions and collectors. “When I see a really good work of art, sometimes I could just cry because more people aren’t going to know about it,” she says.

During our first conversation in New York, where she had stopped off briefly on her way to Brazil, she told me: “The whole question of how to put art into regular life is what interests me the most. I treat art as a service. I think of myself as a service worker.”

Her own life is roughly coincident with the history of video art, which became possible with the production of the first consumer camera rig and video recorder by Sony in 1965. Rist has never engaged in any serious drawing or painting and, unlike many of her contemporaries, has made comparatively few sculptural pieces or other objects to satisfy collectors. I asked her why she is attracted to video work in a world already oversaturated with video images and screens, and she said it is precisely because of that fact. People spend an increasing portion of their waking hours now looking at moving images created by pixels; but most of that imagery is created under “commercial pressure,” as Rist calls it, to sell things or support advertising. Though she certainly strives to complicate this visual environment, it’s not one she judges with anything like straightforward anticonsumerism. “We’ve lived with this for a long time,” she says. “We have the power to know which pictures we want to keep and which pictures we want to excrete from our minds.” But she argues that we also need artists — she uses the wonderfully utopian term “free citizens,” which can encompass a whole lot of what’s being made for YouTube — to create a bank of other kinds of imagery as a counterbalance.

"Using moving images as much as possible for purely philosophical and poetical reasons and goals," she says, "can work as a shield or exorcism of the over-image-reproduced world." And the way to do this, in her opinion, is to borrow the language of television and movies that has become our visual lingua franca, with its color and speed and sensuality, then to reshape it profoundly — to let it wander off square screens and into the world, to heighten its color, to scramble the feeling of distance it gives us that simultaneously brings comfort and a kind of powerlessness. "I use the same ingredients, I think, but I am cooking a different meal," she says.

Treating video images almost as a new form of organic life, she has installed monitors or projected images inside bathrooms, liquor bottles, seashells and, of course, handbags, as well as projecting them everywhere from a Venetian church ceiling to the plaza in front of the Pompidou Center, where she created, in effect, a television screen of Gulliverian proportions that people could congregate atop. "I wanted to get the stories out of the box and just spread them around," she has said of her work.

A fundamental conviction almost since the beginning of her career has been that most representations of life in television and film fail to capture the way we really experience color, partly for technical reasons: bright colors are usually muted slightly to avoid giving pale human skin abnormal hues. Rist herself certainly has no fear of color. When I met her one morning at the Standard Hotel in the meatpacking district of Manhattan, people stopped to stare as she walked by, in bright blue-yellow-and-red plaid baggy pants (which, when the legs were pulled up, converted into a bubble skirt) and a matching jacket, over a canary yellow T-shirt emblazoned with the Chinese character for double happiness.

She is an almost unnervingly intense listener, who sometimes produces a pocket notebook while talking to illustrate her thoughts with charts and diagrams and seems to like talking about evolution and optics more than she does about art. Sitting there at breakfast, she pointed to a lemon wedge perched on the edge of her water glass and leaned down to peer at it through her thick black-framed glasses. "Look how *yellow* that is — it knocks you out — pow!" she said, mimicking a punch to the temple. "But if you filmed it or took pictures of it, it would always be a little less so. I've wanted to find a way for it not to be that way."

It was the first time I'd met her, but I felt as if I'd been spending time with Rist for years at that point. Every time I visit P.S. 1, the contemporary art space in Queens, I make a point of stopping not far from the entrance where a 1994 work of hers, "Selfless in the Bath of Lava," has long been installed. It is a video screen about the size of a matchbox, one you could easily miss, embedded in a hole in the floorboards, with hidden speakers. You try to figure out where the tiny voice is coming from and look down between your feet to see a tiny, naked Rist on the screen looking straight up at you from a sea of superimposed flame, reaching out, shouting ridiculously self-abasing things in several languages: "I am a worm and you are a flower. You would have done everything better."

Often the titles she gives her work are almost worth the price of admission themselves, a kind of verbal equivalent of her visual imagination: "Sip My Ocean," "Open My Glade (Flatten)," "Pimple Porno," "When My Mother's Brother Was Born It Smelled Like Wild Pear Blossom in Front of the Brown-Burnt Sill." The video that most people who have a passing acquaintance with Rist's work have seen is probably "Ever Is Over All," a mesmerizing, looping fantasia with music by the composer Anders Guggisberg, who has long

collaborated with her. In it, a woman in a sky blue dress and red pumps (not Rist in this case, but a friend of hers, Silvana Ceschi) walks down a tidy Zurich street, gleefully smashing the side windows of cars with a metal replica of a sensuous kind of flower known as a red-hot poker.

Bice Curiger, a Swiss curator and a founder of the art magazine Parkett, who has followed Rist's career from the beginning, recalls the difficulty with which her exuberance was initially received: "In the context of the world of video at the time Pipilotti began, the question was: 'Is this serious work or not? Can you be so colorful and so playful and humorous?' But for me what she was doing was bringing in another temperature. A cold medium was being turned into a warm medium." She adds: "It's somehow feminist with a sensual knowledge that is completely different from the generations before her. It's not propagandistic."

For the first work of art Rist ever displayed publicly, on a bridge near Buchs, one of the tiny Rhine Valley villages where she was raised, she bought a pig's heart from a local butcher and plunked it atop a video monitor displaying an early work she made. The experience was instructive. "Nobody noticed the meat on the monitor," she recalled. "People were so concentrated on the image on the screen that they didn't even look two centimeters above."

Rist grew up in the rolling countryside of eastern Switzerland, the second-oldest child in a family of four girls and one boy, though she seems to have been the dominant personality around the house. Her given name is Elisabeth Charlotte; she created her current one, which she adopted in college, by combining her two childhood nicknames, Lotti and Pippi, the latter taken from Pippi Longstocking, Astrid Lindgren's plucky heroine, who could lift a horse with one hand. And there is more than a bit of Longstocking in Rist, who offsets the fine-boned features of a model with a tomboyish physicality. She shakes hands firmly and snorts when she laughs and falls to mechanical tasks with the easy confidence of a union plumber. She ends her e-mail messages with the exhortation "Stay Metal," a funny sign-off for someone who deals mostly in images of flowing water, flowers and the squishier parts of the body, often her own.

In grade school, she decided to move out of her house and took up residence for a couple of weeks in her family's emptied swimming pool, which had a cover that served as a roof. "My sisters would come out and visit me from time to time," she said, seeming a little embarrassed about the incident now. "I guess I just wanted to be independent." Her father, Walter, a doctor, probably had no idea that it was happening, she said, and her mother, Anna, a teacher and a strong-willed woman herself, "probably thought, Oh, she'll just live out in the pool for a while and then she'll come back. And I did."

Her family, while not exactly devout, found itself in church every Sunday, and Rist grew up reading the Bible daily throughout much of her youth. She describes herself as an atheist now. But the scaffolding of belief has clearly remained, not only in the sense that much of her work seems to be haunted by the concept of original sin and Christianity's discomfort with the body but also in the impression she gives of complete personal devotion. "I've always felt that I need to toil alone and hard to make art count," she told me. "To put enough of myself and honesty into a work that I open myself up to the possibility of pain, criticism and hurt."

She studied design and video production in Vienna and Basel and then, for six years beginning in 1988, she played several instruments and sang in an all-woman klezmer punk-pop band called Les Reines Prochaines (the Next Queens), but she was never at ease performing. Even before her time in the band, she was making Super 8 movies and found inspiration in the work of Yoko Ono and of the video pioneer Nam June Paik.

Through them she came early on to the Fluxus movement's anti-elitist emphasis on involving the viewer in the artwork and eroding boundaries between art and everyday life, notions that go back to free spirits like Allan Kaprow, who coined the term "happenings." (In late September, Rist's gallery Hauser & Wirth opened its first outpost in New York by reinventing Kaprow's seminal 1961 installation "Yard," which consisted mostly of piles of tires to climb through. As I walked around the show with her, she paused in front of an old poster for the original exhibition and, pretending to wipe it with her sleeve, said, "We are only polishing their stars, the people from this time.")

Her first video work — she made it in 1986 while studying in Basel, but for all its art-school earnestness, it is still fresh today — was called "I'm Not the Girl Who Misses Much." It features her in a low-cut black dress dancing manically, the camera refusing to focus on her as she repeatedly warbles the words of the title, a riff on the first line of the Beatles' song "Happiness Is a Warm Gun." The piece owed clear debts to harder-edged video predecessors like Joan Jonas and Hannah Wilke and even to performance artists like Marina Abramovic. But even then Rist — who still remembers vividly when Swiss women were finally granted the right to vote in national elections, in 1971 — was forging her own kind of feminism.

It has taken shape in works like one from 2007 that was on display in São Paulo, called "Ginas Mobile." A hanging sculpture that looks vaguely like something Brancusi might have made, it's a horizontally suspended wooden branch with a copper globe hanging from one end and a teardrop-shaped screen hanging from the other. A projector in the globe casts glittery images on the screen of what at first seem to be diamonds on velvet or maybe a lava flow, but then you come to realize that what you're seeing are extreme close-ups of vulvas. (They belong to Rist and four unnamed friends, who came over for a photo session: "I couldn't ask them to do it and not do it myself," she says, smiling.) The effect is much more beautiful than it is gynecological. And as such it is a clear next-generation riff on the more confrontational works of pioneers like Wilke, who was known for photographing herself with little vulva-shaped pieces of chewing gum stuck all over her naked torso, creating jarring portraits of what looked like scarification.

Very early on Rist began to define a visual world that has now become unmistakably her own — blaring color; immersive viewing environments; the body often filmed from just millimeters away to transform it into a near-abstract landscape of flesh, smooth and wrinkled, forested with hair (some of it pubic) and freckles; a point of view that soars, plunges and twirls — an effect Rist creates with a technique she has developed in which she films with a tiny video camera attached to a lightweight handheld boom. She describes this kind of shooting as a form of dance, and a result is footage that rarely provides the viewer with the sense of distance and perspective, even of up or down, that the conventions of television and movies have led us to expect. "I want the viewer and the image to be on the same power level," she says. "I want you and the camera to feel more like one." The visual comparison that sometimes comes to mind is that of medical documentaries, the kind that show deeply color-saturated shots taken by a probe camera navigating within the human body.

"I can imagine that for some people it's too much, and we're afraid of how close she wants to take us to things in the world," says Ewelina Guzik, the lucent-skinned, red-headed woman crawling through the grass in the MoMA exhibition and the title character in "Pepperminta." Guzik, who has become an on-screen alter ego for Rist over the last few years, says that the experience of the movie was "like being on a trip but you

don't need the drugs" and that working with Rist has taught her a lot about basic compassion. "She is so deeply concerned about everybody working around her — and probably also for everyone else in the world," she added. "It's a big part of what her work is about."

The opening of the first of Rist's two shows last month in São Paulo was held on a lovely spring evening at another small institution there called Paço das Artes, or the Palace of Arts. The thriving art community in the city — where people had immediately Brazilianized Rist's first name, pronouncing it "Pipiloichi" — had embraced her, and the place was packed.

I couldn't find Rist, whom I saw the night before at a party for this exhibition holed up in a bedroom on her hands and knees in front of her Macbook Pro laptop, desperately trying to finish editing the new piece for the Museum of Image and Sound. I asked Davide Legittimo, her affable video guru, where she was. "She's probably hiding," he said.

She was, but only from the adults. She was hanging out in a sunken children's play area with her lanky 7-year-old son, Himalaya, who had just arrived from Zurich with his father, Rist's partner, Balz Roth. With his mother's help, he and the other kids were festooning the walls with chalk graffiti.

I asked her if she was happy with the show. She shrugged and smiled. "I am never completely happy — you always think that there should be more," she said. But then she brightened as the kids reminded her of a new idea she had told me about excitedly, one that could serve to extend her radiant video world into the real one: playgrounds designed for adults as well as for children. "I want to build them, in cities," she said. "Just because you grow up, why shouldn't you still be able to play?"

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