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Confronting the screen. Pipilotti Rist: Pixel Forest at the New Museum

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Today, with computers, TVs, and mobile phones, everything is flat and put behind glass – our feelings, histories, longings. We're all separated from each other, for the human being that we are in contact with is always behind glass... But with art, we can jump out of our loneliness. – Pipilotti Rist



Fig. 1: Pipilotti Rist, Pixelwald (Pixel Forest), 2016. Hanging LED light installation and media player; 20:55 min. Courtesy the artist, Hauser & Wirth, and Luhning Augustine. Installation photo: Maris Hutchinson / EPW Studio, courtesy New Museum.

Pipilotti Rist: Pixel Forest at the New Museum presents the first New York retrospective of the Swiss artist internationally recognised for her innovative

video art and multimedia installations.[1] Curated by Massimiliano Gioni, Margot Norton, and Helga Christoffersen, the exhibition provides a highly immersive experience on the second, third, and fourth floors of the museum. Shifting from low-fi single-channel video installations to large audiovisual environments, this major exhibition envelops visitors in a multiplicity of screens, projections, and soundscapes. In exploring a diverse range of screens and their relationship to the body the exhibition not only traces the trajectory of Rist's artistic career but also resonates with an ongoing preoccupation in film, media, and screen studies concerning the status of screens in light of their proliferation in contemporary life, their changing technological properties, and the shifting experience of the moving image.



Fig. 2: Pipilotti Rist, *Open My Glade (Flatten)*, 2000. © Pipilotti Rist. Single-channel video installation, silent, colour; 9:07 min. Courtesy the artist, Hauser & Wirth, and Luhring Augustine. Installation photo: Maris Hutchinson / EPW Studio, courtesy New Museum.

The screen and urban space

A video projection of Pipilotti Rist, her face and hands tightly pressed against a glass surface, appears on the large windows at the entrance to the New Museum. As Rist slowly moves from side to side her facial features become flattened and distorted, establishing a sense of bodily proximity to the visitor that is simultaneously denied by the glass screen. This work – *Open My Glade (Flatten)* – was first presented in 2000 as a video installation on the NBC Astrovision by Panasonic board commissioned by the Public Art Fund.[2] In that context Rist's palpably corporeal confrontation with the screen interrupted the constant flow of advertising images on the illuminated screens and oversaturated billboards of New York's Times Square at regular daily intervals. Throughout the month of January 2017 this video installation reappeared there as part of the Midnight Moment project on numerous screens, creating a vast digital landscape of bodily distortion.[3] While evoking Ana Mendieta's 1972 photographic series *Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints – Face)*, Rist's grotesque representation of the feminine body propels itself into the very centre of late capitalism's excesses. Eva Lajer-Burcharth contrasts Mendieta's metaphorical deployment of the glass plane as a mask of identity with Rist's conceptual envisioning of the screen as a mode of self-definition.[4] Rist's fragmentation of her body across the dense visual fabric of Times Square creates, as Lajer-Burcharth writes, 'a smear on the screen of the urban spectacle,' shifting the focus from visual representation to the public spaces in which we negotiate our subjectivity in relation to the incessant circulation of commercially and culturally produced fantasies and desires.[5]

The glass panes at the entrance of the New Museum present a different, but equally generative, space for Rist's video installation as the work mediates between interior and exterior, drawing attention to the very limits of the museum's architecture. In this context the glass screen of *Open My Glade (Flatten)* frames the exhibition as a site of encounter with the screen and the artist's body while envisioning the museum as a cultural space that participates in the production of subjectivity, showing how the female subject can be represented on and beyond the screen.



Fig. 3: Installation view. Includes single-channel video installations. Installation photo: Maris Hutchinson / EPW Studio, courtesy New Museum.

Breaking the screen

Entering the exhibition on the second floor visitors are introduced to a variety of viewing experiences. Rist's early video art is presented in a corridor of pyramid-shaped viewing booths which harshly intrude into the narrow exhibition space. Lined in soundproof foam, they isolate the viewer's head from the outside world. In these audio-visual installations the direct and individualised confrontation with the television monitor becomes a platform for exploring representations of the female body on screen, one of which, Rist's first single-channel video *I'm Not the Girl Who Misses Much* (1986), parodies music video tropes by warping audiovisual effects.

In contrast *Pickelporno* (1992), Rist's experimental response to pornography, is obliquely projected onto a wall around the corner, encouraging a public viewing of the bold and erotically charged video. In this work bodies are experienced from extreme proximity, as they are filmed using a miniature surveillance camera.[6] Appropriating the 'lipstick camera', which was originally designed for concealment, Rist subverts the power relations implicit in a voyeuristic mode of surveillance, equating the role of the 'carnal' body and

the camera.[7] She argues that '[one] should not be able to tell if the camera is filming the body or if the body is touching and filming the camera as well.'[8] The video thus charts intimate corporeal topographies while exploring the limits of visual representation, blurring the boundaries between the bodies, the camera, and the screen.



Fig. 4: Pipilotti Rist, *Ever Is Over All*, 1997. Two-channel video and sound installation, colour; 4:07 min. Sound by Anders Guggisberg and Rist. Courtesy the artist, Hauser & Wirth, and Luhring Augustine. Installation photo: Maris Hutchinson / EPW Studio, courtesy New Museum.

The exhibition subsequently moves even further beyond the frame of the television monitor, suggesting that the screen as a medium of visual encounter must be expanded and perhaps even destroyed. In Rist's well-known audiovisual work *Ever Is Over All* (1997), projected into a corner of the exhibition space, a young woman in a flowing dress and bright red heels joyfully walks down the street with what appears to be a large single-stemmed flower. This visual motif resonates with the field of flowers in the adjacent projection, which partially overlaps with the image of the street sequence. Suddenly, the woman swings the flower and begins to smash the windows of cars parked along the street. The glass screens shatter one by one as she triumphantly resumes her cheerfully destructive mission. While clearly presenting a feminist intervention this work literally shatters screens, signaling the need for a

conceptual shattering of conventional notions.[9] While *Ever Is Over All* thematises the dispersal of the material screen and its conceptual implications it is through the exhibition's move beyond the optical image and static projection that this transformation is realised.

Expanding the screen

Ever Is Over All alternates with *Sip My Ocean* (1996) on the same screening surface. This work consists of two mirrored kaleidoscopic videos projected on the corner walls and is accompanied by Rist's slow, melancholic cover of Chris Isaak's song 'Wicked Game'. The haunting, dreamlike quality of the soundtrack fills the room and the viewers' mental space. Unlike inside the isolated pyramid structures the soundscape here shifts to reverberate beyond a single work, creating an atmosphere of which the viewer is constantly aware even while meandering through other parts of the exhibition space.



Fig. 5: Pipilotti Rist, *Administrating Eternity*, 2011. Four-channel video installation, silent, colour, with two moving mirrors and curtains; 9:29 min / 12:27 min / 5:35 min / 5:47 min. Courtesy the artist, Collection Kunstmuseum St. Gallen. Installation photo: Maris Hutchinson / EPW Studio, courtesy New Museum.

The gallery thus becomes a permeable space – a theme rendered tangible in *Administrating Eternity* (2011), a video installation which is itself silent but becomes imbricated in the soundscapes of the adjacent projections. In this installation multiple videos are projected onto a number of translucent fabric screens hanging from the ceiling. The experience of the installation constantly shifts as visitors move between the curtains to see the projections from different viewpoints. Interestingly, the visitors' bodies become part of the processes of screening, either as sites of projection or appearing as shadowy figures behind the gauzy screens. As Giuliana Bruno remarks in relation to Rist's 2010 installation *Layers Mama Layers*, which deployed a similar set of suspended translucent fabrics as sites of projection, this strategy 'renders the ever-present environmental screen-effect within which we now live'.[10] No longer confronting the screen from traditional angles, we become immersed in a multisensorial and total screen environment permeating public and private spaces.[11]



Fig. 6: Pipilotti Rist, Installation photo. Includes: *Vorstadthirn* (Suburb Brain), 1999; 8:52 min / 6:53 min / 12:44 min. *Die Unschuldige Sammlung* (The Innocent Collection), 1985; 1985–approx. 2032 (work in progress). Friedrich Christian Flick Collection im Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin. Installation with different unprinted packing materials. Courtesy the artist, Hauser & Wirth, and Luhring Augustine. Installation Photo: Maris Hutchinson / EPW Studio, courtesy New Museum.

In an earlier attempt at extending the two-dimensional screen into space, Rist created *Vorstadthirn* (*Suburb Brain*, 1999), a work that features a projection onto a miniature model of a suburban residential home and its surroundings. The projection represents a seemingly idyllic family dinner that is undermined by burning dinner plates. The colours of fire are echoed in a large-scale sunset sequence projected on the corner walls of the exhibition space where various domestic objects are displayed, while a third projection on the wall captures Rist's monologue on life and personal relationships. In this complex constellation of projections traversing various surfaces the mobile images disrupt the artificially-constructed and static façade of suburban life, thus making visible the anxious architectural, social, and mental spaces of suburbia.



Fig. 7: Pipilotti Rist, *Mutaflor*, 1996. Single-channel video installation, silent, colour; 43 sec. Courtesy the artist, Hauser & Wirth, and Luhring Augustine. Installation photo: Maris Hutchinson / EPW Studio, courtesy New Museum.

The enveloping screen

On the third floor the exhibition engages the viewer's body in an engulfing and often unexpected manner. In Rist's *Mutaflor* (1996), a looped video projected onto the floor, the camera whirls around the artist's naked body and

enters her open mouth. The video then surprisingly cuts to a close-up of her anus and repeats this cycle with slight variations. When standing on or right next to the projected image the viewer seems to be continually swallowed and expelled from the artist's body in a hallucinatory movement of repetition. Through this seeming dissolution of the screen dividing the artist's and the visitor's body Rist produces a visceral experience of proximity that is characteristic of her poetics and politics.

The boundaries between inside and outside, the body and the screen, the physical and the digital, become radically dismantled in Rist's *Pixelwald* (*Pixel Forest*, 2016). It is composed of 3,000 LED lights in crystalline resin suspended from the ceiling, their colours continuously changing in synchronisation with the adjacent large-scale projections. Here, the particles of an exploded screen create a space in which visitors become fully immersed. While visually arresting due to its constantly changing bright colours the work is most compelling in its environmental fragmentation of the digital screen and the seductive enmeshing of physical and virtual bodies. It also effectively encapsulates Francesco Casetti's concept of *display* that defines the contemporary screen as 'a place on which free-floating images stop for a moment, make themselves available to users, allow themselves to be manipulated, and then take off again along new routes'.^[12] The *Pixel Forest* generates precisely such transitory encounters between the self and circulating images as mediated by the screen. This mesmerising environment generates the phenomenon of taking photographs on mobile devices and widely sharing them on social media, which transports the work beyond the gallery and feeds it back into the digital realm. The exhibition space is thus not only illuminated by the colourful LED lights but also by the numerous mobile screens of visitors attempting to take images of themselves in the installation. The possibilities of enactment and self-representation in this gallery in turn seem to add to the public attraction of the exhibition. The gestures and interactions of the visitors thus merge with and become a key element of the installation.

Moving through this environment reminiscent of a sea of luminous jelly fish the viewer also apprehends the large-scale projections of *<Mercy Garden>* and *<Worry Will Vanish Horizon>* (2014) that play in loop on a vast portion of the gallery's walls. As viewers are encouraged to watch the audiovisual installations from a low angle (sitting or lying on a carpet and pillows facing these corner projections) they are viscerally immersed in the viewing experience. Close-up images of the natural realm and the body in saturated colours unfold in a slow, hypnotic rhythm, affecting the very architecture of the

exhibition space. The fluctuating projections transform the walls into porous membranes and liquid environments, almost dematerialising the stable architectural framework.



Fig. 8: Pipilotti Rist, *Worry Will Vanish Horizon*, 2014. Two-channel video and sound installation, colour, with carpet and pillows; 10:25 min. Dimensions variable. Sound by Anders Guggisberg. Courtesy the artist, Hauser & Wirth, and Luhring Augustine. Installation photo: Maris Hutchinson / EPW Studio, courtesy New Museum.

In the corner of the third floor gallery space *Massachusetts Chandelier* (2010) offers another unusual projection surface: a chandelier made entirely of different types of underwear onto which luminous colours are projected. Visitors can enter and peek into the structure from below, becoming enveloped in an assemblage of intimate fabrics and implicating themselves in an unusual form of voyeurism. *Deine Raumkapsel (Your Space Capsule, 2006)* on the museum's fourth floor even necessitates a voyeuristic mode of viewing (this time from above) as the miniature bedroom is concealed in a tall wooden crate. A small projected video image circulates around the diorama, drawing attention to the walls and floor which are partially painted to evoke a fragment of the cosmos. Capturing the dual meaning of *Raum* as both room and (outer) space the work playfully merges the everyday with an imaginary landscape, juxtaposing mundane objects such as an open box with leftover pizza with a giant moon occupying one corner of the room. It thereby erodes

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the boundaries between exterior and interior, physical and mental architectures.



Fig. 9: Pipilotti Rist, Massachusetts Chandelier, 2010. Two-channel video installation, silent, colour, with chandelier made of used and washed underpants with one centrally placed lightbulb; 5:32 min. Height: 98 3/8 in (250 cm); diameter: 66 1/8 in (168 cm). Collection Marguerite Steed Hoffman and Deedie Rose. Installation photo: Maris Hutchinson / EPW Studio, courtesy New Museum.



Fig. 10: Pipilotti Rist, *Deine Raumkapsel (Your Space Capsule)*, 2006. Video and sound installation, wooden transport crate, turning projector, media player, audio system, with a bed, chair, wallpaper, and diverse objects to scale of 1:6; 9:59 min. Courtesy the artist, Hauser & Wirth, and Luhring Augustine. Installation photo: Maris Hutchinson / EPW Studio, courtesy New Museum.

The amorphous screen

The site-specific installation *4th Floor to Mildness* (2016), occupying nearly the entire exhibition floor, re-establishes a dialogue with the architecture of the museum space. Two amorphous screens are horizontally suspended from the ceiling, displaying fragmented views of the body, plants, and other elements filmed under water. When viewed from below the projections effectively approximate the experience of being underwater. A dreamy soundtrack by Soap&Skin lulls the viewers into a dreamlike state – although the visual pleasure deriving from the images is interrupted by the floating debris and visceral close-ups of a body. Moreover, visitors are encouraged to experience the work horizontally by lying down on beds scattered around the room. Pamela M. Lee has addressed the phenomenon of horizontal viewing which frequently appears in contemporary exhibition installations of time-based media.[13] She argues that 'lying in the gallery chimes with cultures of work post-internet; namely our literal incorporation of its media platforms

and the generalization of the network as an all-pervasive and ambient resource'.[14] In the context of the gallery the viewer becomes bodily implicated in the total environment of display. The museum space itself thus participates in a world of media characterised by the dissolution of distance between the physical and the digital.



Fig. 11: Pipilotti Rist, 4th Floor to Mildness, 2016. Video and sound installation with two projections onto two amorphous screens hanging horizontally from the ceiling, single and double beds with pillows and covers, four projectors, two moving mirrors, four media players, audio system, black sprinkler net, curtain, carpet, wall paint, neon, 8:11 min / 8:11 min / 7:03 min / 6:19 min. © Pipilotti Rist. Courtesy the artist, Hauser & Wirth, and Luhring Augustine. Music and text by Soap&Skin/Anja Plaschg. Courtesy Flora Musikverlag and [PIAS] Recordings. Installation photo: Maris Hutchinson / EPW Studio, courtesy New Museum.

The transforming screen

In other spaces of the museum unexpected interventions between the self and the screen emerge. For example, a smartphone lies in the middle of a narrow staircase leading from the museum's upper floor. At first sight it seems that someone must have accidentally dropped their device on the ground, yet it quickly becomes clear that even this object is part of the exhibition. On the phone's display a video shows the naked artist crying out and reaching toward the spectator as if she were trapped in a miniature

hell. *Selbstlos im Lavabad* (*Selfless in the Bath of Lava*, 1994) is a work that can be missed by many visitors – if they choose to instead take the elevator or another staircase – but it provides a humorous and self-reflexive commentary on our condition of distraction in a world permeated by screens. This work has been previously exhibited on a small monitor embedded in an opening in the floor, so as to suggest a hellscape opening beneath the visitors' feet.[15] In this iteration, however, it has migrated onto a mobile device. While the smartphone is reconceived as a site of the artist's suffering associated with existential dread and anxiety, it is safely contained within this portable format in the visitor's reach.



Fig. 12: Pipilotti Rist, *Selbstlos im Lavabad* (*Selfless In The Bath of Lava*) (Bastard Version), 1994. Single-channel video and sound installation, colour, on mobile phone; 6:20 min. Courtesy the artist; Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York; videoart.ch; Hauser & Wirth; and Luhring Augustine. Installation photo: Maris Hutchinson / EPW Studio, courtesy New Museum.

Overall, ambiguities about the implications of the screen permeate the three-floor exhibition, as Rist seems to be both complicit in and critical of the seductive nature of the contemporary screen. While the artist is intensely pre-occupied with the notion of the screen she presents it as an unstable concept in constant flux. As the visitors move through the exhibition, Rist's audiovisual work moves away from the static (albeit already contested) space of the television screen to vibrant projections of moving images that interact with

other objects, bodies, and ever-expanding surfaces. The screen becomes multiplied, fragmented, and transformed, moving from the optical to the environmental. Overall, the exhibition constructs a convincing trajectory that encompasses the viewer in its screening operations. In a colourful and playful manner Pipilotti Rist's exhibition offers a necessary intervention in the contemporary moment, exploring the anxieties and fantasies related to the proliferation of screens in our lives.

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- www.timessquarenyc.org/times-square-arts/projects/midnight-moment/open-my-glade-flatten/index.aspx (accessed on 1 May 2017)

Notes

- [1] The exhibition was held from 26 October 2016 to 15 January 2017. It was accompanied by the exhibition catalogue *Pipilotti Rist: Pixel Forest*, edited by Massimiliano Gioni and Margot Norton.
- [2] Public Art Fund, 'Public Art Fund: Open My Glade': https://www.publicartfund.org/view/exhibitions/5855_open_my_glade.

- [3] Times Square Arts in collaboration with the New Museum, 'Midnight Moment: *Open My Glade (Flatten)*': <http://www.timessquarenyc.org/times-square-arts/projects/midnight-moment/open-my-glade-flatten/index.aspx>.
- [4] Lajer-Burcharth 2006, pp. 151-152.
- [5] Ibid., pp. 152-153.
- [6] Rist's use of the 'lipstick' camera also draws on earlier twentieth-century precedents of surveillance technology, such as miniaturised and hidden photographic cameras. On the history of image-making surveillance techniques see Phillips 2010.
- [7] Pipilotti Rist in conversation with Massimiliano Gioni, Gioni 2016, p. 66.
- [8] Ibid.
- [9] As Francesco Casetti argues, while commonly used metaphors such as the window, frame, and mirror allow for a theorisation of the cinema and television screen they have become insufficient for describing the current screen explosion. See Casetti 2015, pp. 157-162.
- [10] Bruno 2014, p. 102.
- [11] Ibid.
- [12] Casetti 2015, pp. 12-13.
- [13] Lee 2017.
- [14] Ibid.
- [15] MoMA PS 1, 'Pipilotti Rist: *Selbstlos im Lavabad (Selfless in the Bath of Lava)*' <http://momaps1.org/exhibitions/view/169>.