

Between the Womb & the Asshole

The first time I saw Pipilotti Rist's retrospective at the New Museum was with my mother. We had just drunk bloody marys. We talked the whole time, constantly narrativizing our experience to each other, letting Rist's images wash over us, glowing. The ocean figures prominently in Rist's work: she often shoots underwater, invariably invoking the amniotic fluid of the womb. Mother love. All three floors of the exhibition—gauze panels on the first floor, jellyfish esque strings of light on the second (a new installation created especially for this retrospective), beds and pillows on the third floor, accompanied by puddle shaped projections—cultivate undersea, womb like environments. What kind of eroticism can we locate in this return to the womb? Parents bring their children to this exhibition in droves. Toddlers toddle about, freshly emerged from the anal stage of development: anus as erogenous zone, doing everything back to front. In *Mutaflor* (1996), Rist films herself naked, moving the camera from her asshole to her pink lipsticked mouth. Asshole and mouth: two universal orifices. As I watched this video, a three year old boy ran through the projection, bathed in light.

The second time I saw it I was stoned and alone. Different substance. Different affective sphere. This time, I was struck by how in Rist's work, events flatten into texture, that is, discrete objects—a penis, a flower—are viewed from such close range that they become mere surface, or else, groups of objects are viewed from so far away that the same effect occurs. The camera caresses these objects, regarding them less as subjects of the videos and more as *material*, the way a painter uses paint. Occasionally, Rist uses this tactic to let small dramas arise out of the

surfaces, such as in the two channel video *Ever Is Over All* (1997), in which a woman runs down the street, smashing car windows with a flower. Closeups of flowers are projected adjacently, locating the drama—the narrative, even—of the window smashing in a world of abstracted textures, that is, the event (the window smashing) arises from the surface (the closeups of flowers). But in many of Rist's works, *nothing happens*, and not just in the historical avant garde sense of plotlessness: there is no event, only surface. In *Sip My Ocean* (1996), images of the sea floor alternate with shots of clouds, fish, and a young boy's chest, equating these items so that they all become a texture.

Many of Rist's pieces provide a similar experience to that of a Brontë novel: in them, the domestic—supposedly a space of safety for women—is made terrifying. *Massachusetts Chandelier* (2010), a chandelier made of men's and women's underwear, renders the innocence and cuteness of these white underthings monstrous and sinister. A video full of reds and greens, unintelligible and abstracted, is projected onto the sculpture, edging the chandelier's imposing shadow with color. Here lies the terror of not knowing what you're looking at. *Vorstadthirn (Suburb Brain)* (1999) consists of a diorama of a suburban lot, complete with a house, garage, fence, and backyard; two layered videos are projected on the back wall, a third on the side of the house; to the right is a wall of white clothing and kitchen implements on a white background. Because the gallery lighting is suited to video, the diorama is cleverly lit with miniature street lights that complete the suburban scene. We view this scene at night, from the sleep side. A miniature lawnmower, firewood, and a basketball lie scattered about: the refuse of suburban life. Hay bales gesture towards the more pastoral world present in many of Rist's other pieces. Behind the diorama, the twisting branches of an apple tree (*Apple Tree Innocent*

on *Diamond Hill* (2003)) evoke the gothic world of a Brontë novel. The projection on the side of the house depicts a sinister domestic scene: a family dinner where the food is on fire. In the video on the back wall, Rist films her lips closeup as she talks about relationships, romance and domesticity, the countryside whipping past outside a train window. "Should one end the relationship when it is at its best?" she asks. And then: "all this overblown romanticism to rot together in pairs of two...have breakfast, sleep, relax, work." The juxtaposition of the gothic suburban scene with this monologue indicates an ambivalent terror of the couple form and domesticity.

This installation makes it easy to read many of the other videos, with their closeups of skin, assholes, vaginas, penises, and breasts, as embodying a kind of impish sexuality in the face of the domestic horror of the couple form. In *Japsen* (1998), a video made with Muda Mathis, closeups of penises and nipples are spliced together with images of oranges, black eyed susans, and water, photoshop collage style.

Standing in the dark, these images make me feel the presence of the one I love, who I no longer see, or the longing that has come to replace, that I have come to mistake for his presence. In the space of Rist's addressee dyad, I feel him. Who is Rist looking at, and who is she speaking to? There's a closeness here, an unbearable intimacy. She speaks to *tu*, not *vous*. I try to locate myself on this map of sexual politics. The closeups of skin and genitals make me think about fucking my lost love; such fantasies always seem to mark this banal melancholia. But these abstractions also move me beyond heteronormative conceptions of sex, towards something less coupled, like masturbation or an orgy. These closeups of flaccid cocks make male sexuality lose its claim, its strong arch. They represent a movement away from a narrative

of ejaculation—an event—towards a kind of pleasure that circles around and around, the pleasure of the vagina, perhaps, but also the asshole, the womb, the mouth—a texture. We want mother love. The constipation of childbirth. The big shit.

Rist's project is largely one of orienting the viewer's body in space in relation to her videos—a project which is not always successful. The first two wall sized installation setups—one of which alternates *Ever Is Over All* and *Sip My Ocean*, the other of which displays *Pour Your Body Out* (2008)—are not well thought through. On the floor lies a carpet and pillows, inviting one to lie down, but the videos are projected on the wall, suggesting that one should sit or stand. Lying on the carpet, I wondered why the videos weren't projected on the ceiling. Luckily, this wish is fulfilled on the third floor of the exhibition with the piece *Tyngdkraft, var min vän (Gravity, Be My Friend)* (2007), in which ceiling projections are accompanied by beds on which one can lay down.

In another unsuccessful instance of orienting the viewer's body in space, a group of videos play on televisions inside pyramid structures which jut out from the wall, allowing only one person to watch at a time. In *Sexy Sadie I* (1997), a naked man leaps around a forest floor, soundtracked by the Beatles song, constituting a jocular reverse objectification of the man's body. In *I'm Not The Girl Who Misses Much* (1986), a female figure jumps up and down, her breasts bouncing. It's unclear what Rist is trying to accomplish in this shift from communal to individual viewing experience, which mostly results in viewers disgruntledly lining up, waiting their turn to watch, or unsuccessfully attempting to watch in pairs.

Selbstlos im Lavabad (Selfless In The Bath Of Lava) (1994), displayed on a prone iPhone halfway up the staircase between the second and third floors, constitutes one of the more skillful maneuverings of the viewer's body in space: I was delighted by this bizarre gesture of having to bend over to watch a very small screen on the ground. Rist screams "I am a worm and you are a flower" in English, French and Italian, looking up at us, her body collaged on an image of hell: she's a supplicant, a heathen. She says *tu* and not *vous*, which moves this address from the space of the general viewer to a closer kind of intimacy, a lover, a singular *tu*.

On the top floor is *Tyngdraft, var min vän (Gravity, Be My Friend)* (2007), two puddle shaped projections, below which lie dozens of beds complete with sheets and pillows. The first time I saw the show, I shared a queen sized bed with my mother. The second time, I thought, *thank god there are double beds, for those of us who are often alone*, and lay down by myself. The video is shot from below the surface of the water, the camera aimed at the sky, which gives the viewer the feeling of being at the bottom of the ocean. We see lily pads, Rist's damp blonde hair, light playing on the water.

The last piece consists of a diorama in a shipping container, depicting a bachelorette apartment, complete with a miniature copy of Yoko Ono's *Grapefruit*, a twin mattress on the floor, and a half eaten pizza. The diorama cuts away to reveal the moon and stars; a projection spins around its walls, depicting blades of grass which morph into a face. It's tempting to read this piece as a solution to the problems of sexual politics in the domestic horror of *Vorstadthrin* and the bed drama of *Tyngdraft, var min vän*, as an assertion that it's best to resist the couple form, to be alone. This reading seems simple and reductive, one that follows a heterosexual, second wave feminist narrative: a room of one's own is the answer, simple and pat. This last

piece must be read in conjunction with the rest of the exhibition and its gestures towards the anal and the oral, circling around and around, textured pleasures and effusive surfaces.