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THE ART WORLD

FEELING GOOD

The art of Pipilotti Rist.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

The Swiss video- and installation-maker Pipilotti Rist is an evangelist for happiness like no other first-rate artist that I can think of, except, perhaps, Alexander Calder. Like Calder, she is immune to solemnity, and her work appeals to more or less everybody. Rist's rigorously disciplined hedonism elates anew at the Luhring Augustine gallery. The show, enigmatically titled "Heroes of Birth"—nothing in it corresponds with the gallery announcement's photograph of a pregnant woman in a hospital, her immense belly studded with bright-red fetal monitors—centers on a darkened room with five ranks of white scrims hung diagonally across it. Wall-mounted projectors stream soft-edged videos of sheep grazing and at play in an Alpine meadow, whose grass a camera now and then nuzzles in ground-level travelling shots, and of crisp, roving computer animations of pale-green and lavender circles that, in concentric arrays, wax, wane, and gyrate three-dimensionally. Saturated natural and artificially juiced colors ravish the eye. Color is more than the keynote of Rist's art—it's practically the theology. There's a dual soundtrack: a high wind, faintly heard; and, louder, sweet dings from a music box, slowed way down. The barely identifiable, poignant tune is the "Internationale," melting into the work's gestalt of funny, tender, devotional beauty. If the gallery is crowded when you go, good. Fellow-viewers silhouetted behind the scrims—awim in deeply layered, peaceable torrents of sheep and geometry—make membership in humanity seem a superb idea. At the mobbed opening, my mood put me in mind of Walt Whitman's on the Brooklyn ferry: "myself disintegrated, every one disintegrated yet part of the scheme." The effect is both incessantly stimulating and peculiarly restful. The longer you linger the better it gets.

Rist, who is forty-eight, lives in Zurich with her longtime partner, Balz Roth, an entrepreneur with varied in-

terests, and their seven-year-old son, Himalaya. She was born and raised in Grabs, a Rhine Valley town near the Austrian border. Her father is a doctor, her mother a teacher. Rist's given name, Elisabeth Charlotte, yielded in childhood to the nickname Pipilotti, after Pippi Longstocking. It was a prophetic whimsy. Pipilotti still channels Pippi in spirit, minus the superhuman strength but plus a grownup sexuality. Rist studied commercial art, illustration, and photography at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna, then video at the School of Design in Basel. She worked off and on as a graphic designer. From 1988 to 1994, she played flute and bass in a female band and performance group, Les Reines Prochaines (the Future Queens), which had an avid following in Europe. In her first well-known video, "I'm Not the Girl Who Misses Much" (1986), she cavorts frenetically, in grainy and tattered images, to a speeded-up lyric from the Beatles' "Happiness Is a Warm Gun." With such further music-based videos as the double-screen "Ever Is Over All" (1997), to a song that she co-wrote—an actress gaily smashes car windows with what looks to be a tropical flower, to the approval of a passing policewoman—Rist redeemed, for art, the languishing aesthetic promise of MTV-type music videos, recasting them as a tradition. Her pop-cultural affinities don't unite high and low so much as make them seem like interchangeable engines of pleasure. Rist resolves no critical problems of contemporary art. She just makes you forget that there are any. She is feminist, certainly, to a degree beyond issue and argument.

In another room of the show, scores of mostly women's undies, from vintage bloomers to lacy notions (nothing very racy), hang from the ceiling in a vertical configuration of two incomplete cones, joined at their bases. A light bulb inside qualifies the ensemble as a chandelier.

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Video projectors caress the garments with flowing imagery of flowers, grass, and sky. My companion said that the piece reminded her of the first mornings of summer vacation in her youth. I got it: a tingling air of innocent excitement. Richly colored wallpaper repeats kaleidoscopic patterns of joined female hands and of indistinct male genitals. Rist regularly invites appreciative contemplation of the body's nether regions sensuously but without overt sexuality, which would disrupt her work's socially inclusive, cordial charm. She diffuses eroticism to the separate senses and the thinking mind—not that thought is allowed much traction. There's a steady state of wonderment at having a body right here, right now, in a world of bodies and of things that bodies enjoy (water, flowers and fruit, other bodies, mud). Imagine, as Rist makes easy in the show's main room, being a sheep in a lush meadow entirely surrounded, as far as you can see, by what you like to eat. Life surely vitiates such sublime contentment most of the time, but numbness to it seems an optional tragedy.

There are limits to the reach of Rist's grasp. I'm disappointed by her first feature film, “Pepperminta,” which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival last year and will be shown at the Hirshhorn Museum, in Washington, D.C., next month. A surreal romp about a misfit little girl who grows up to crusade for sensual joy in a grouchy world, wielding magical colors and counselled by the ghost of her grandmother, it is worth seeing for its visual and musical gorgeousness and for its intermittently ingenious comedy. But “Pepperminta” shares the common flaws of most first movies by successful artists who lack tactfully skeptical friends. Like the instructive failures of David Salle's “Search and Destroy” (1995), Robert Longo's “Johnny Mnemonic” (1995), and Cindy Sherman's “Office Killer” (1997)—and unlike Julian Schnabel's pretty good start, with “Basquiat” (1996), and his startling triumphs, with “Before Night Falls” (2000) and “The Diving Bell and the Butterfly” (2007), which thoroughly outshine his paintings—“Pepperminta” presents a squirmy spectacle of actors who are visibly baffled, though game, and perhaps amused, by what is expected of them, including, in this case, antic nudity and an unfortunate sacrament: drinking

from a chalice of menstrual blood. (My mind wandered at that point.) Rist has said that she is far less liberated than Pepperminta. It figures, given the film's painfully forced audacities. Any artist's internally grounded imaginative process almost inevitably unravels and coarsens when it must be communicated to others in a collaborative medium. (Something

likes of Jeff Koons (a gifted artist with a lot to answer for) and Damien Hirst (from whose nightmare of chipper cynicism we may finally be awakening), Rist stands out in a graver light. Responsible as well as responsive to contemporary art's enlarged public sphere, she maintains standards of craft and sincerity—outward discipline, inward necessity—



Rist at her new show, “Heroes of Birth.” Photograph by Sylvia Plachy.

analogous generally happens when show-biz folk fancy themselves visual artists.)

Pleasure is a serious matter in and for art, which must justify itself continually in a global culture of mass entertainments. Glumness is an understandable but self-defeating reaction of people determined to somehow make a difference. Rist is remarkable for having insisted on bliss throughout an era, which peaked in the nineteen-nineties, when a parade of artists ambitiously expanded art's physical scale and social address only to burden it, self-importantly, with theoretical arcana and political sanctimony. (Going to galleries and museums became like attending church or school.) Today, after a subsequent spell of market-bedizened, balefully frisky seductiveness, from the

that speak for themselves, without critical gloss or winking irony. She is innovative but conveys no wish to be congratulated on it. Rather, she makes advanced techniques of video and installation seem like common-sense means, as normal as pencils. Are these negative virtues? They have a big positive payoff. In the spell of Rist's work, I feel the world of art, momentarily indistinguishable from that of life, stabilize inside and around me—with such lightness! The mood doesn't last, of course, but it leaves a trace in the heart, endorsed by the mind, of stubborn hope. ♦

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Slide Show: Schjeldahl on Pipilotti Rist.