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“I am a birch tree”

Pipilotti Rist, curator: Stéphane Aquin. Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal. May 11 - August 6, 2000

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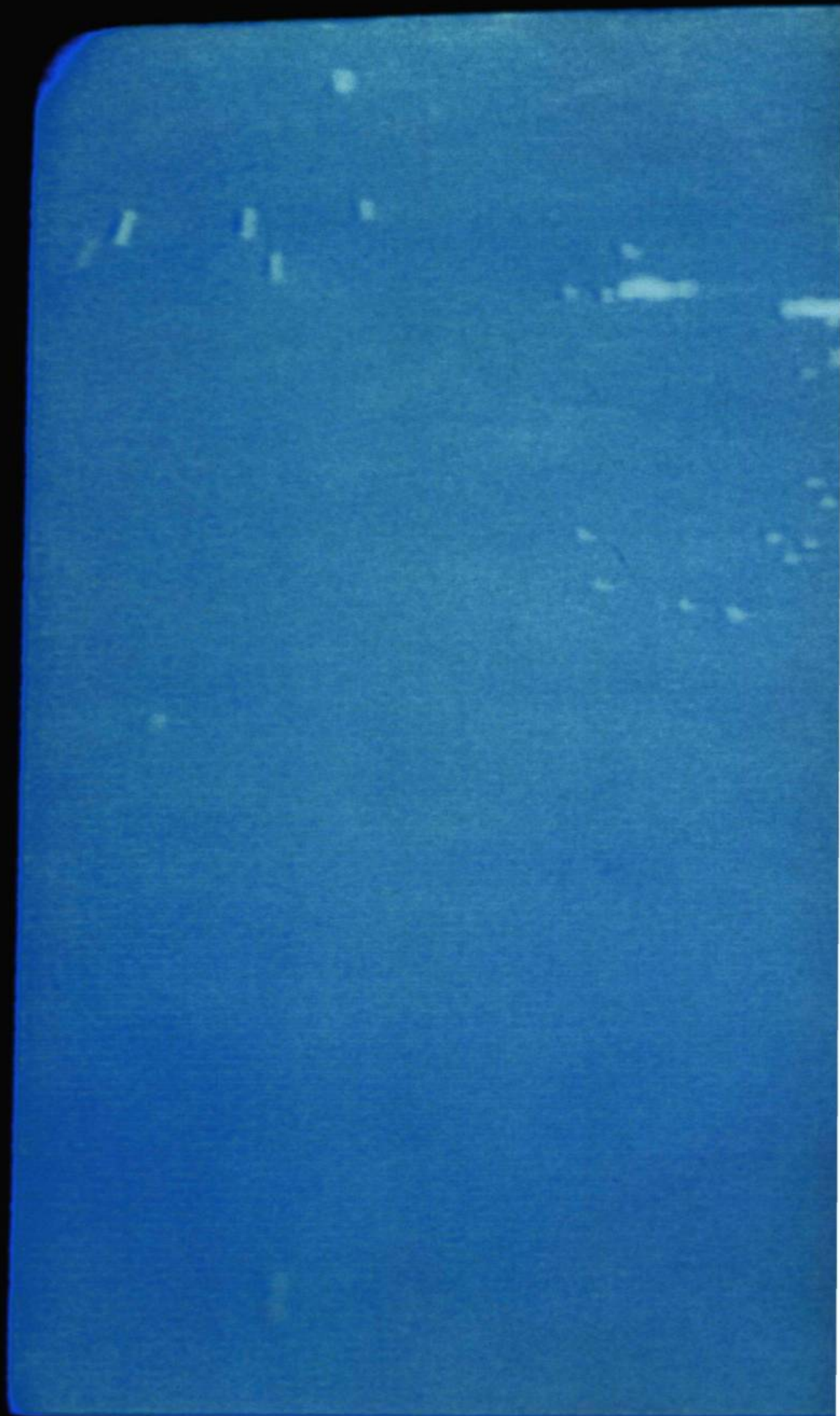
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Pipilotti Prati, *Sip My Ocean*, 1996. Installation video. Courtesie: Galerie Hauser & Wirth, Zurich; at Lehring Augustus Gallery, New York.



Montréal

“I AM A BIRCH TREE”

Pipilotti Rist, curator : Stéphane Aquin.
Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal. May 11 - August 6, 2000

Pipilotti Rist's video installation work at the Musée des beaux-arts in Montréal succeeds in bringing significant articulation to the presence of video work in the visual arts. This work stands to captivate even those who have fled monitor domination at home and in the workplace for the open spaces of the galleries.

Upon entering, we see small monitors placed midway up the main staircase; these are as little portals onto the exhibition spaces before we arrive. The work is called *Monitor Blossoms*. The screens used are similar to those one might find at a front desk for the surveillance of premises, only these ones are released from duty. The tape is recorded in and around the exhibition spaces during the setup period. Their cords, entwined with foliage, signal the detente of expected contentions between nature and technology and then trail up to the next floor.

The works brought together in the main exhibition area span the better part of a decade, giving us the opportunity to trace the treatment of reoccurring themes, and get a sense of the broader elements that situate the artist's production. The first of the major pieces is projected in mirrored halves onto the corner angles of a large exhibition space. *Sip My Ocean* is a stunning colour suspension bath of swimmers and marine life. Seen underwater, the hands, bodies and luminous veiny eyeballs of two swimmers, as well as jellyfish and other plants and swimming things, diffuse in total close up, or else feed into the crease at the center of the projection area or float off the edges. A succession of elements eventually insinuate themselves into the experience; a teapot, a toy camper, and then other brightly coloured domestic objects which gently sink to the bottom of the sea without stirring a wave, introducing references to the domestic environment, which reappear in a number of Rist's works. A languorous female voice sings the Chris Isaak ballad "Wicked Game" to a simple guitar arrangement. A second, more child-like voice comes in at intervals from a different part of the room, farcically shrieking along with the chorus, "Oh, I don't want to fall in love... with you."

Rist performs these two tracks and does the sound and music for the other works in this exhibition; she composes the various aspects of subject matter and also acts as camera operator, editor, and often as the main character. Rist's work is often noted for being influenced by music videos. The presentation of them in a crowded space, as in many music videos, does not

detract from the coherence of the works. The viewer circulates around the work, and becomes selectively able to assemble signals from many sources at various intensities and moments, elaborated by common threads across the many works. Rist elaborates the aspect of viewer directed experience introduced by video installation work of previous decades, through the spectators' frequently variable physical relationship within the work. While we walk through the rooms of the exhibition with Channel Pipilotti' essentially all around us, the installation brings the colour and appeal of mass communications, but enhances the reflective space of our own subjective responses, rather than reducing it, as much T.V. and computer contact has been identified as doing. The works are effectively anchored in an expanded range of physical referents beyond merely reflexive comparisons to mass television programming, yet inclusive of it.

As the work is considered in relation to visual approaches previously in existence, it is evident that general evolution of technology is more precisely incremented and linked to changing material and social conditions than the visual arts have been with all the charting of art movements. The evolution of the new technologies, which are the result of complex collaborations by large numbers of technology developers responding to social and material demands, occupies an important place in contextualizing works that employ of all kinds of visual technologies. This has led to the general sense that the ideas of authorship and subjectivity in relation to much art production are so expanded and far reaching as to render the evolution of the visual language seemingly unclaimed by direct human social encoding, understood almost entirely as the output of the unnamed workings of the technology and its independent development. The artist who is generally the user of the technology is sometimes faced with steep technical learning curves needed to work with an increasing selection of tools and the formats which become quickly replaced, updated or simply overused, leaving the artist with a reduced span within which to process and structure complex, individualized productions. At this stage the artist surpasses the role of technician by the ability to overcome the displacing effect of the technology and become represented in the work in some substantial way. It is useful to ascertain the subjective origins of Rist's layered approaches, which go beyond merely having first access to newly updated tools.

Before even arriving at the exhibition, the artist's name attracts attention. Pipilotti Rist's first name derives from a fusion of Astrid Lindgren's 1950 storybook character, Pippi Longstocking¹, with her given name Charlotte. This synthesis is worth nothing because Pippi Longstocking is not merely a delightful raunchy character, she is the central persona in what could be considered a veritable master handbook of performance art. While not obviously similar in approach, much of the work in this exhibition shares some interesting underpinnings with the book character.

Pippi moves into a quiet conservative town where people keep things toned down. She has superhuman strength, bags of gold, and a wild imagination. Most chapters of the first book open with Pippi, purposeful and disciplined, getting about her absurd tasks of the day. Then one thing leads to another as she follows absurdly simplistic logic to its most kooky conclusions, which often invites mishaps. She is more than capable of fixing things in her own offbeat way, or is able to turn an unfortunate situation into one of fascination and happy acceptance. This is liberating. She feigns obliviousness to fearful situations. While her actions sometimes seem dangerous and silly, they usually carry a great deal of wisdom and generosity, and she is easily prepared for heroic gestures that demand extraordinary reactions. But sometimes she gets carried away and is just plain naughty. It's this aspect that makes her even more unpredictable and precludes any superhero construct for others to relinquish their own decision making capacities to. Pippi acts as the subconscious released and restored to plain sight, running amok with her fire-red braids sticking out at right angles to her head.

The joining and leveling of what are termed conscious and subconscious aspects of behaviour in Pippi's personality, or the erasure of personal boundaries between public and private in Pipilotti's work, are no longer contentious areas. They are features consistent with social developments relating to a shift in the sciences and the history of communications. Since the Second World War especially, there have been increasing movements, from focus on the traits of the individual organism and hierarchy style management towards sociobiological systems and communication modes². This redefinition of human relationship to the world has both accompanied and been led by certain ideological formations relating to gender and race rights. These shifts are reflected in Rist's work in multiple ways.

For example, she is often centrally featured onscreen looking into the camera. She is defined not as an idol, though she is clearly equipped to have chosen that option, but by the active relationship of her character in regard to her circumstances.

While the thematics of the work include a variety of stated intentions, the most evident sets of issues relate to concepts of movement and stasis. The theme of stasis is especially apparent in the piece *Rainwoman : I Am Called A Plant*. It is a large scale video projection on a kitchen wall installed with kitchen appliances. The discarded body of a fuchsia-haired woman is pictured in a puddle with grass and mud, as the rain falls around her. Nature is no Eden here. It intersects with the kitchen setting, in which the tap dripping out the seconds of the hour would be the parallel form of precipitation. This state of being voided of power of mobility and social intent, seems to corroborate a type of exile from the socialized world; she is left with nothing but the biology of her own body. We catch a glimpse of her perhaps lifting herself out of the puddle or river bed at the end of the sequence, but then see her fallen body again immediately afterwards as the loop continues. Stasis is linked to the defeat of female potential, implied in isolated gender-typed roles.

Nearby, a microscreen embedded in the floor, *Selfless in the Bath of Lava*, suggests that the physical location of hell is just beneath the floorboards, as we feared, visible through a knothole in the wood. We look down on a tiny female figure surrounded by fiery lava impetuously imploring assistance. Stasis is hell.

Suburb Brain embodies movement and stasis in its construction and has a bit of a discussion about it. It is a confessional tape of a female character in a moving vehicle projected onto a maquette of a suburban home which appears altogether too small and too still. The character talks about growing up and about the altruistic values she learned, and now reflects on these issues as an adult. She speaks about issues of abandonment of the family by the male head of the family, and of the female head of the family's subsequently limited situation in maintaining the living situation, then later puts a question to herself; should one break up when love is at its best? "Yes, no, maybe", she says. The work shows the flight but not the resolution. It's clear that she anticipates that the relationship could weaken or usurp her. The self and the other's needs are in conflict, they seek to negate the other and yet remain intact. The fact that she is pictured as being in motion denotes that she



Pipilotti Rist, *Les Intéressées dans le bain de lave*, 1994, installation vidéo. Courtoisie: Galerie Hauser et Wirth, Zürich et Luhring Augustini Gallery, New York.

does have the choice of following either of the traditional options or of negotiating a different one of her own.

"I am a birch tree", she says. As in the piece *Rainwoman : I Am Called A Plant*, there seems to be some suggested correlation between the confinement to a gendered functionality and the rooted immovability of plants. This female becomes ever more identified with the natural world through shared disenfranchisement and inability to interface adequately with the ideological and material economy they contribute to. The exhibition elaborates additional aspects of nature's relationship to humans. To thoroughly commune with nature seems to require a removal of many social judgments about the body. Several pieces suggest nature as a place where things do not lend to immediate cultural valuation or encoding, a world that is touched by, but not made up of complex empowerment or disempowerment issues.

The Room contains another take on domestic life. Several viewers at a time are able to sit and pass the huge remote control device around, dwarfed in a gigantic living room couch and chair set out for them in front of a great big T.V. The home pictured from a child's perspective is a safe agreeable place to watch T.V. The issues of the adult world are put on the T.V. as a fiction, represented in Pipilotti's collection of single channel tapes produced over the course of previous years. In the exhibition catalogue, the artist is photographed in this installation leaning in, eyes transfixed on the T.V. This is the only appearance of a T.V. monitor in the whole of this video exhibition.

It's included as much as the subject of the work as its delivery system. It is rendered almost nostalgic, belonging to an earlier time.

The identification with children and the earlier storybook references produces the opposite of an infantilizing effect. Her positive identification with that which is child-like creates a mechanism of its own. It's much like Pippi Longstocking, who had all kinds of interesting ways to distance herself from that which would infringe on her way of being in the world. This is rather effective in the context of the visual arts, considering that the work is part of a more widespread phase of video installation. There are new readings associated with the dynamic use of the technologies, which at this time are associated with some power redistribution in the art scene.

It seems that in an overall sense, the artist's use of the video camera is presented as a sort of channel from the isolation of limiting social ideologies to a network of human relationships where it is possible to reconsider and construct dynamic possibilities. This exhibition takes the unwieldy issues, and through the layering of static and moving elements, produces exceptionally well resolved works of art. It activates the museum experience with the promise of continued potential.

JOAN RZADKIEWICZ

NOTES

- ¹ Astrid Lindgren, *Pippi Longstocking*, New York, Puffin Books, 1950.
- ² Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women : the Reinvention of Nature*, New York, Routledge, 1991, p. 44-46.